

Political-Media Relations and the Power of Party-Based Regimes

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SUMMARY

This dissertation analyzes how political parties influence mass media content in relation to public policy issues and the economy. It specifically analyzes how party control of government – specifically how control of Congress and the Presidency – influences how media organizations report on public policy in American politics. This study examines a variety of approaches that try to explain how media bias operates, including those claiming that journalists are liberally biased, that reporters share a pluralistic bias (in which room exists for all types of state and non-state actors in reports), that journalists have a hegemonic (or pro-business) bias, or that they share a pro-government, pro-official source bias (known as “indexing”). This study finds evidence that the pro-official source (indexing) bias is the strongest model of the four for explaining how journalists report on public policy issues. More specifically, the composition of government (which parties control Congress and the Presidency) is the most powerful model in terms of predicting how media outlets report political conflicts and debates as related to public policy.

The pluralistic model of bias is mostly rejected in this study, since state actors (over non-state actors) overwhelmingly dominate stories. The liberal media bias model is roundly disconfirmed in this study, with little to no evidence that journalists regularly quietly tailor their reporting to fit a liberal agenda. The hegemonic bias model is also rejected in terms of accounting for the ways in which reporters cover stories related to public policy. Hegemonic (pro-business) forces, however, may play a role in influencing not so much what appears in stories, but what does not appear, due to the advertising pressures exerted on editors to leave out of stories those views that are critical of business interests altogether.

I. INTRODUCTION

In September of 2011, the *Pew Research Center* reported its most recent findings covering public opinion of the mass media. The findings were strongly critical, in terms of public assessments of media quality and “bias.” As *Pew* found, public distrust in the mass media had reached a historic high. The data, covering a 26 year period, found that the percentage of the public who felt that news stories “are often inaccurate” had reached 66 percent, compared to a low of 34 percent in 1985. Similarly, 77 percent felt that media “tend to favor one side” of major political issues, compared to 53 percent in 1985. Finally, 80 percent agreed that media are “often influenced by powerful people and organizations, in contrast to 53 percent who felt this way in 1985.¹

Other surveys undertaken around the same time found similar levels of public distrust and skepticism as directed against media. A national survey from *The Hill* Congressional magazine found that 68 percent felt the media were biased, with respondents twice as likely to feel media exhibited a liberal over a conservative bias.² A *Gallup* survey from the same time period suggested that 47 percent felt the media were “too liberal,” compared to just 13 percent who felt they were “too conservative,” and 36 percent who believed media were “just about right” in terms of the quality of their reporting.³ These surveys, aside from suggesting strong public distrust in media, were noteworthy in that they demonstrated the tremendous salience of the issue of media bias in the public mind. The issue of bias occupies a prominent place not only in the public mind, but in the concerns of media and political communication scholars as well. This latter groups continues to discuss whether media are biased in a liberal direction, or in some other direction, to this day.

Debates about media “bias” are ongoing, and reach back decades into the past. Scholars continue to disagree about whether media outlets are systematically biased in favor of liberal or pro-business perspectives, or whether other biases may exist. Many assert that a pro-official source bias is

at work, discounting liberal and pro-business (hegemonic) approaches. Regardless of one's point of view, the question of bias is likely to consume much academic time and energy in coming years.

A. Dissertation Plan

In this dissertation, I seek to examine competing claims of media bias, examining news content across many different economic policy issues. The study of media coverage of public policy has generally been neglected in recent years, with much of academic energy being devoted to studying how mass media report on foreign policy and military conflicts. Refocusing on domestic issues in U.S. politics, I seek to answer basic questions with regard to alleged media bias in covering public policy conflicts. I address a number of very broad questions in relation to the mass media. First, are the mass media devoted to reporting the widest diversity of perspectives, including both liberal and conservative ideologies and the statements of both state and non-state actors? Are non-state actors regularly incorporated into stories on more than simply a nominal level? In a democratic society, one might expect reporters to make a serious effort to report the opinions of a variety of political actors, and to convey competing ideological positions on contentious public policy battles. A failure to report a wide diversity of views would suggest a failure of the mass media in adequately informing the general public on political issues.

In this dissertation, I address four competing media models, assessing how well they predict media content across a variety of policy debates. I examine the liberal media model, which suggests that news reports are biased in favor of liberal and progressive positions, due largely to the liberal-Democratic political and partisan predispositions of national reporters. Contrary to the liberal media approach, I evaluate the hegemonic model, which suggests that media are biased in favor of business perspectives and positions, largely as a result of structural factors such as corporate ownership of news outlets and advertising pressures operating in a capitalist media system. A third model I evaluate is

media indexing, which suggests that the media are not biased in a liberal or hegemonic direction, but rather in favor of official narratives. Journalists are seen as privileging state actors more generally, due to news norms of “objectivity” that stress the importance of telling “both sides of a story” – meaning both liberal-Democratic and conservative-Republican sides. Finally, I examine the emerging pluralist model, which frames media reporting as increasingly favoring non-state actors and envisioning reporters as seeking to balance reporting between official and non-official sources.

In testing these models, I analyze a wide variety of issues, drawn from the last decade and a half of public policy disputes. These issues are not minor in their significance, but rather represent major policy disputes that took place in the 1990s and post2000 period. These issues include: the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage debates, the 2001 tax cut dispute, the 2005 Social Security reform conflict, the 2009 stimulus debate, and the 2009 executive bonuses controversy. I selected these specific issues not only because they represented major policy disputes, but also because they are representative of debate that took place within competing partisan regimes. The minimum wage debates occurred during divided partisan control of government (Congress and the Executive), while the stimulus and executive pay controversies occurred during unified Democratic partisan control, and the Social Security and tax cut debates took place during unified Republican control. Sampling from these different partisan eras, I am better able to determine whether composition of government and partisan control are relevant factors in terms of influencing media content.

B. Media Analyzed

In this dissertation, I review a diversity of news mediums prior to assessing competing media models. I include television cable outlets, local news and national wire services, national broadcast news, and national newspaper reporting when testing competing models of media bias. I also analyze a number of different forms of media content when assessing competing media models. These include

op-eds, editorials, and news stories. These steps were taken so as to ensure the generalizability of my findings with regard to the mass media as a larger political entity. Examining a relatively large number of sources, and across a relatively large number of issues, I am able to provide very general conclusions with regard to the explanatory and predictive power of the four media models. By comparing the four models within a single research design, I am able to avoid the classic levels of analysis problem that plagues other studies that examine only a single issue, or a single model at a time. By including all models, while looking at each across many issues, I provide far more convincing conclusions as related to general questions of media bias.

In order to better understand the question of media “bias,” I undertake a number of extensive reviews of the ideological disputes driving each public policy debate. I review the major positions of various think tanks, research organizations, and political figures, prior to analyzing whether any biases exist in media content in relation to those positions. This approach better allows me to establish criteria that are not solely determined by the media content I am analyzing. It is necessary to develop an independent familiarity with each policy debate *prior* to examining alleged biases, at least if one is to effectively and competently document how these policy disputes are reported in the news. After developing this familiarity, I closely analyze multiple components of stories in search of biases, including story headlines, story leads, quoted sources appearing in stories, mentions of party leaders, and various frames appearing in stories, which are expressed by those who favor and oppose specific policy proposals in question. I undertake both a quantitative and qualitative analysis for each policy issue, so as to provide a more nuanced, encompassing examination of each case study.

This study is divided into five chapters. In Chapter One, I review the competing media models in detail, engaging in a systematic literature review of the empirical studies to date covering issues of alleged media bias. I follow this literature review with my research design and predictions, established in Chapter Two, which test competing hypotheses related to the liberal, hegemonic, indexing, and

pluralist model. Enough predictions are presented so as to allow for a comprehensive assessment of each model as applied to the six policy issues in question. In Chapter 3, I examine all four models as applied to the two cases of divided government – covering the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage debates. I provide consistent conclusions in this chapter, describing which of the competing models best accounts for coverage of both policy disputes. In Chapter 4, I review the models and their predictive power as applied to issues debated under unified Republican control of government – related to the 2001 tax cuts and 2005 Social Security conflicts. Again, I find consistent results validating one of the models over its competitors. Finally, in Chapter 5, I examine the four models as applied to policy conflicts occurring under unified Democratic government – as covered in the 2009 stimulus and 2009 executive bonus controversies. As with the other chapters, my findings consistently suggest that one of the four models is far more effective in predicting coverage compared to the others.

Following the five body chapters of this study, I end with a brief conclusion, which summarizes the findings of this work. I discuss the strengths of my approach, while also highlighting the weaknesses and limits, which suggest questions that are relevant for future research designs. The results from this dissertation, when assessed alongside the findings from other media studies of U.S. foreign policy, suggest that a comprehensive framework for understanding media “bias” is now identifiable, to the benefit of political communication scholars. General trends are apparent in media content across both domestic and foreign policy issues, despite the widespread neglect of, and failure to analyze reporting on domestic policy in recent years. This study, then, represents an important step in the progressive of political communication research in terms of identifying a general framework for understanding media bias, across many competing policy issues, and in a variety of different policy areas international and domestic.

Notes

¹ Pew Research Center, "Press Accuracy Hits Two-Decade Low," *Pew Research Center*, 14 September 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1341/press-accuracy-rating-hits-two-decade-low>

² Niall Stanage, "The Hill Poll: Most Voters See Media as Biased and Unethical," *The Hill*, 25 July 2011, <http://thehill.com/polls/173173-the-hill-poll-most-voters-see-media-as-biased-unethical-and-cozy>

³ Lymari Morales, "Majority in U.S. Continues to Distrust the Media, Perceive Bias," *Gallup*, 22 September 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149624/majority-continue-distrust-media-perceive-bias.aspx>

II. REVIEWING THE SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON MEDIA AND ECONOMIC POLICY

Democrats and Republicans in Congress often take polarized positions in support of, and in opposition to government regulation of business, redistributive policies (from the wealthy to poor), and market-based policy reforms. The minimum wage is a case in point with regard to redistributive politics, as it was the subject of intense debate between both parties in 1996 and 2007 when the national wage levels were increased. Republicans often repeat claims based on neoclassical economic assumptions, arguing that mandatory raises in the minimum wage produce increasing inflation and higher unemployment. In the 1996 debate over the minimum wage, for example, House Republican Majority leader Dick Armev argued that “Raising the minimum wage won’t benefit working Americans; it will only increase the number of non-working Americans by destroying crucial entry-level jobs.” Conversely, Democrats were more likely to discuss the issue within a social justice framework. Challenging Armev’s claims in 1996, Democratic Representative Jack Quinn stressed that “People who work a 40-hour week ought to make a wage they can live on. The minimum wage hasn’t been increased in seven years. Even welfare pays much more. We must correct this so people are not forced to choose between work and supporting their families.”¹ As this dissertation demonstrates, Democratic-Republican ideological disagreements are apparent for all types of economic policy issues that are delineated along liberal-conservative lines.

While the ideological orientations of Democrats and Republicans in government are clear concerning liberal and conservative policy disagreements, the role of mass media in reporting such disputes remains an open question. Do American media outlets serve as mediators for Republicans and Democrats who dispute the relevance and legitimacy of liberal and conservative policy initiatives? Are media organizations overwhelmingly biased in favor of liberal-progressive policies, as conservative

critics claim, or is there a systematic discounting of liberal-progressive interests in favor of pro-business positions, as hegemony theorists contend? Alternatively, are media outlets so diverse in their coverage of economic policy issues that it is not possible to generalize across all of the venues in question? This last question implies that reporting may be pluralistic in orientation, failing to privilege any side, and relying on a balance of state and non-state actors. Unfortunately, little research has been done on press coverage of economic policy issues. As a result, scholars benefit from minimal information regarding patterns of media reporting and editorializing in this important policy area.

In April of 2007, the editors of the *New York Times* spoke eagerly about the likelihood that a new increase in the minimum wage would be passed in coming months. They spoke of the “disturbing tendency” of Democrats in Congress to placate Republicans by adding tax cuts for business to the wage bill. Despite their disapproval of the tax cuts, the editors continued: “Congress is to be commended for making the minimum wage bill a priority and should look for every opportunity to send it to Mr. Bush.”² From this editorial, one could discern that the *New York Times* strongly favored redistributive policies (transferring resources from business interests to the working poor), although it is uncertain whether that commitment translated over to its op-ed columns, its reporting, or to the coverage and editorializing on other economic policy issues. This dissertation examines many types of media content as related to not only the minimum wage, but a variety of other economic policy issues – including the 2001 tax cut debate, 2005 Social Security reform proposals, the 2009 executive pay controversy, and the 2009 stimulus debate.

A. Media Reporting & Economic Issues

The nexus between mass media and economic policy is generally a neglected field of inquiry in scholarly studies. Nonetheless, a modest literature is emerging, often characterized by high levels of contention about what specific role the media play in reporting national economic policy disputes.

Many questions have not been adequately answered regarding the role of media in relation to business, public policy, and the state. Media and public opinion scholar Benjamin Page elaborated upon the lack of understanding with regard to an over-arching model for explaining media coverage. Page questions whether media outlets “use their publications and broadcasts in a purposive and unified fashion to pursue policy objectives.”³ He poses numerous questions, asking whether ideological biases are discernable in both editorials and news stories, and to what extent media are responsible for promoting wide-ranging deliberation on policy issues. Concerning media scholarship, Page identifies “few systematic efforts to investigate possible mechanisms of owner or manager control of media’s political stands.”⁴

Media scholars have addressed the power of media to assist in “setting the agenda” for discussion of major policy issues.⁵ Media “frame” political events and issues in ways that emphasize some parts or facets of reality at the expense of others,⁶ and dramatize conflicts between public officials regarding the formulation of public policy.⁷ Media scholar Jukka Pietilainen finds a positive correlation between the changes in the level of news reporting on foreign countries and changes in trade with those same countries.⁸ Other studies by Van Belle, Rioux, and Potter uncover evidence that media outlets are instrumental in actually influencing foreign policy making itself. In the case of foreign aid, the above scholars conclude that the increased salience of media reports on economic development and disaster allocations appears to result in the growth in aid commitments.⁹

While media outlets may retain significant power in influencing public agendas, there is no lack of criticism of the allegedly harmful effects of mainstream reporting. Political Scientist Thomas Patterson, for example, calls for media reform that will “contribute to an informed public.”¹⁰ Reporters, Patterson claims, focus too heavily on news stories as “episodes,” neglecting the overarching “themes” present within those reports. Media, Patterson argues, “are adept at covering events. They are, in fact, organized to carry out this task. Conversely, they are poorly designed to inform their audience about

the issues underlying these developments.”¹¹ While Patterson challenges media on an overarching level, the quality of news reporting on specific economic issues remains neglected.

B. Reviewing Contested Media Models

Scholars study media coverage of economic issues from a variety of viewpoints and models. Outlined below are what could be deemed the most prominent paradigms for analysis of media coverage, including: 1. indexing; 2. hegemony; 3. “liberal” media; and 4. pluralism. The literature covering these four models is explored in depth, prior to the onset of my study.

1. Media Indexing and Foreign Policy Reporting

As one of the most prominent schools of thought regarding media coverage of public policy, the indexing model portrays mass media outlets as tailoring their coverage to fit the range of views being expressed by national political officials.¹² Unfortunately, most of the indexing literature is devoted exclusively to media coverage of foreign policy issues, and generally overlooks questions of media reporting on domestic (particularly economic) policies. Still, exploring the arguments of indexing theorists is vital, in order to examine whether their claims about press-state relations are relevant to news reporting on domestic economic issues.

In a seminal work examining the American media and the Vietnam War, Daniel Hallin found that critical media coverage of the war grew during times of government discord:

In situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as “responsible” members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as a whole. In situations of political conflict, they become more detached or even adversarial, though they normally will stay well within the bounds of the debate going on within the political “establishment.”¹³

Similarly, in *Debating War and Peace*, Jonathan Mermin examines media coverage of eight separate U.S. military interventions abroad, and finds that the prevalence of criticisms of each intervention depended heavily upon "the spectrum of debate" in Washington politics – and more specifically on whether criticisms have already emerged from within government.¹⁴

Political scientists John Zaller and Dennis Chiu are careful to distinguish between different forms of indexing.¹⁵ These forms include: "source indexing," whereby "reporters simply make the rounds among [official government] persons familiar with issues" and write "stories that summarize what they have been told," and "power indexing," in which "journalists may consider information newsworthy in proportion to its capacity to foretell or affect future events." Zaller and Chiu discuss reporters who "paid disproportionate attention to the statements of Bush administration officials" during Senate hearings over the 1991 Gulf War "because, far more than other witnesses at the hearings, these officials were in a position to determine whether the U.S. went to war or not."¹⁶ The authors' call for more research in examining indexing's relevance for reporting is well taken, particularly in relation to coverage of national economic policies.

Within the indexing tradition, political communication scholar W. Lance Bennett highlights the dangers of "politically managed" news that "provides little solid basis for critical thinking" on the part of media consumers.¹⁷ Bennett draws attention to "increasing limits on the content of news that stem from the manufacture and sale of news as a commercial product...[news] assignments are made increasingly with costs, efficiency, and viewer or reader reactions run with fewer concerns about informing the public."¹⁸ Bennett's criticisms of the American press are motivated by a fundamental concern over the effects of corporate media ownership and conglomeration on the quality of news. Bennett's critique of corporate media, however, does not approach the more radical level seen in the hegemonic model, whereby news outlets are depicted as the propaganda agents of the state.¹⁹ Although indexing theorists such as Daniel Hallin and W. Lance Bennett also appropriates the concept of

hegemony (or focus on reporting as subject to pro-business hegemonic pressures,²⁰ one can see that the concept is heavily contested between those indexing theorists (such as Bennett) who employ it in their descriptions of the media as either “semi-independent” in its potential,²¹ and other media scholars such as Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky, and Robert McChesney, who depict media outlets as the propaganda lap-dogs of political, economic, and military state elites.²²

The indexing model for press reporting receives strong support in empirical studies. The model situates elite discourse between Democrats and Republicans in Congress at the forefront of media deliberation on economic policy issues. Congressional and executive branch officials, rather than union representatives, business officials, or other non-state actors, are seen as the dominant sources in media reporting. Furthermore, political officials from the president’s party (PP) may receive more attention, and be quoted in stories more often than non-presidential party (NPP) members, during times of unified PP control of both the Congress and Executive. This expectation flows from an indexing model arguing that transformations in media coverage are contingent upon changes in the composition and structure of government.

2. Hegemony and Mass Media Propaganda

Most hegemonic analyses of media are heavily *economic* in orientation, as opposed to indexing studies, which focus more heavily on media coverage of agreement and debate amongst *political* elites. At its core, hegemony implicates media corporations in promoting narrow upper-class business interests at the expense of democratic deliberation. The concept of hegemony was originally developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the early 20th century. Gramsci contended that hegemony was defined through a binary division between “coercion and consent,” through which societal elites exercise leadership over subordinated groups and individuals through non-violent means. Hegemony is “rooted in an economically dominant, or potentially dominant, mode of production” in which a capitalist elite

exercises control over thought and attitude formation among the masses.²³ The role of the “dominant fundamental group,” however, is not to force subordinates into submission through the use of violence; quite the opposite, “consent is ‘historically’ achieved through the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production”²⁴ In Gramsci’s original application, hegemony presupposes “an active and practical involvement of hegemonized groups, quite unlike the static, totalizing and passive subordination implied by the dominant ideology concept” used by some hegemony theorists.²⁵

Hegemonic analyses remain relevant to social science research, especially concerning media reporting on economic issues. The hegemonic understanding of mass media represents a dominant approach in the area of mass media coverage of economically related topics. Political science and economics professor Robin Mansell explains that, through a political-economic analysis, studies focus on the “pressures toward commodification of news media and its consequences for the way in which power is distributed through the material conditions of the capitalist system.”²⁶

Hegemony theorists contend that reporters and editors have been co-opted within a system whereby they actively subscribe to the norms that drive the capitalist system of economic production, thereby circumventing the need for regular suppression and censorship from business owners above them. Radical political scientist Michael Parenti is echoed by numerous other political communication scholars who argue that media programming does not simply “reflect reality”; rather, it actively constructs reality in preference of one interpretation of the world over another.²⁷ This is the lesson that flows from the analysis from scholars such as Berger, Luckmann, and Tuckman, all of which emphasize how reality is “socially constructed” by media and political actors for general audiences and the public.²⁸ More specifically as related to hegemony, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson describe the social construction of economic messages that appear as “uncontested” by reporters, editors, and owners;

they are “routine, taken-for-granted structures of everyday thinking” that “contribute to a structure of dominance.”²⁹

As far as domestic news, communications scholar Robert McChesney perhaps stands at the forefront of hegemonic attacks on the mass media.³⁰ McChesney faults mainstream media for failing to live up to the expectations of democratic theory:

There are two indispensable functions that journalism must serve in a self-governing society. First, the media system must provide a rigorous accounting of people in power and people who want to be in power, in both the public and private sector. This is known as the watchdog role. Second, the media system must provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day. No single medium can or should be expected to provide all of this; but the media system as a whole should provide easy access to this for all citizens.

“By these criteria,” McChesney argues, “the U.S. media system is an abject failure.” McChesney points to the emergence of “the modern commercial press system” and “the severe contradiction between a privately held media system and the needs of a democratic society.” Journalism, in light of the rise of media “objectivity” throughout the 20th century, has “three distinct biases built into it”: the overreliance on official news sources “as the basis for legitimate news,” the need for “a news hook or a news peg to justify a news story” (sometimes referred to as “episodic” framing), and the “smuggling in” of “values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers.” While media outlets are defined by their professionalism, McChesney contends that reporters are typically “oblivious to the compromises with authority they routinely make,” as seen in such subtle acts as the equation of the “spread of ‘free markets’ with the spread of democracy” within news stories.³¹

The hegemonic model is adopted in a number of media studies related to economic public policy. One of the most prominent areas of study utilizes the concept of cultural hegemony in describing entertainment programming. In *Framing Class*, Diana Kendall addresses media representations of social inequality, working class images, the poor, and the homeless. Kendall's analysis establishes a dichotomy in media coverage between favorable messages for, and images of

elite, privileged groups and individuals, and less favorable messages and images as related to the poor and less fortunate. Kendall identifies popular depictions of the wealthy as “like everyone else,” “caring and generous people,” as “personify[ing] the American dream,” and as leading the way promoting the “gospel of materialism.”³² Conversely, she describes entertainment programming on working class and the poor as overwhelmingly defined through the following portrayals: workers and unions as greedy and affiliated with organized crime, caricatures of the poor as “white trash,” the working class as comprised of “buffoons, bigots, and slobs,” and blue collar workers as “out of work or unhappy at work.”³³

Kendall’s findings are echoed by other scholars who claim that entertainment program is contemptuous of labor and working class Americans. Jerry Rollings’ study of television during the 1980s found that entertainment programs emphasized service and professional occupations “at the expense of the production sector.” Unions were “almost invisible on television” programs and were depicted as “violent, degrading, and obstructive” when they did receive attention.³⁴ Additionally, Rollings found “the role that unions continue to play in improving the quality of life and of working conditions for workers is almost never illustrated.”³⁵ This claim was reinforced in later studies by Michael Parenti, who claimed that Hollywood films convey images of unions as coercive, criminal, and ineffective.³⁶

Stepping away from entertainment programming, hegemonic theorists also claim that anti-labor messages are common in news reports covering workers, strikes, and unions. In *Dissent*, David Glenn spotlights media editorials for negatively portraying unions affiliated with the *AFL-CIO*, following their efforts to derail “fast track” trade legislation in the late 1990s.³⁷ Christopher Kollmeyer maintains that “negative news about the economy [has] disproportionately depicted events and problems affecting corporations and investors instead of the general workforce.”³⁸ In his analysis of the *Los Angeles Times*, Kollmeyer found a pro-investor, pro-corporate bias: in 201 stories reviewed from 1997-1998, “articles reporting problems threatening corporations and investors” appeared in 73.7 percent of the paper’s front pages, and had an average length of 1,447 words. Conversely, stories focusing on “problems

threatening workers” were represented in only 21.2 percent of front-page stories, and had an average length of only 1,315 words. Articles referring to corporate and investor reforms vastly outnumbered stories on reforms “designed to help workers,” while the average word length of the latter is dramatically shorter than the former.³⁹

Media representations of labor are also described as abjectly negative. Sociologists David Croteau and William Hoynes examined the guest line up of *Nightline* and *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, finding that only 5.7 percent of the guests on *Nightline* were representatives of labor, public interest groups, or racial and ethnic leaders.⁴⁰ On *Nightline* programs covering the economy, 37 percent of guests represented corporations, 17 percent were government officials, and only 5 percent represented labor. Croteau and Hoynes found similar pattern was found on *MacNeil-Lehrer* news programs.⁴¹ In terms of actual coverage of labor strikes, news stories were said to be systematically biased against worker demands. Goldman and Rajagopal claim that, in reporting the Coal Strike of 1977-1978, *CBS* highlighted the futility of the strike, harmful consequences for consumers, the potential for violence, the militancy of miners, and shortcomings of union officials, amongst other negative frames.⁴² As James Tracy argues, strikes against newspapers themselves have historically been characterized as depicting employers as “victimized” in light of worker intransigence. In the 1965 strike at the *New York Times*, Tracy emphasizes that management was portrayed in the paper as “sincere” while the union was “underhanded” in its negotiating. Substantive grievances of the strikers were allegedly neglected, while government mediators were seen as self-sacrificing and optimistic about settling the strike despite company refusal to consider worker demands.⁴³ Coverage of labor is also described as sensationalistic. Studies by labor scholar Puette, Erickson, and Mitchell suggest that, although strikes occur in only a miniscule number of cases in which unions negotiate contracts with their employers, they account for between one quarter to one-third of all news coverage on unions. Negotiations, although occurring in

the vast majority of instances (as opposed to strikes) garner as much as one-quarter of all coverage of unions.⁴⁴

Finally, a small, but increasing body of literature has emerged charging corporate media outlets with contemptuously covering anti-corporate globalization movements. Much of the initial literature is focused on the last decade or so, in which a large, trans-nationally based movement arose to challenge corporate globalization and free market capitalism. Progressive author William Solomon depicts reporting in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* on anti-capitalist protests as oversimplifying the views of the protestors, and portraying them as “zealots” against international institutions “which actually represent the best hope for the world’s future.”⁴⁵ *Columbia Journalism Review* writer John Giuffo highlights coverage of four corporate globalization protests throughout North America and Europe for their consistent lack of “context” in reporting demonstrators’ major grievances.⁴⁶ It is not uncommon for scholars to lambaste media institutions for adopting a hegemonic framework, whereby protests of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization are framed as “against globalization.” For example, Adler and Mittelman highlight media reliance on a single definition of globalization as driven by free market-based business interests, as opposed to an admission that globalization may also be driven by transnational activism and grassroots movements (including the protests of corporate globalization).⁴⁷

Studies that have examined media reporting on the 1999 WTO protest in Seattle often provide a picture of media as critical of the protestors. Tamara Goeddertz and Marwan Kraidy contend that media stressed the “deviant” nature of protestors, while editorials and columns on the protest were clearly biased in favor of “free trade.”⁴⁸ Jules Boykoff’s analysis of the Seattle coverage suggested that over 60 percent of the reporting from the major networks, cable news, and national newspapers featured a “violence frame,” covering skirmishes between police and demonstrators, despite the protests being overwhelmingly non-violent (with regard to protestors’ actions).⁴⁹ Boykoff contends that media

renditions of dissident movements, whether “starkly negative” or critical “in much subtler ways,” are nonetheless “agreeable to the elite power structure.” He speaks of a media practice known as “bi-level demonization,” whereby “an external foe from the international arena is demonized and therefore depicted as deserving of punishment,” and “a domestic dissident or group is linked to the external demon.”⁵⁰ This claim remains relevant when exploring coverage of labor leaders, and in assessing whether such actors are marginalized in reporting on economic policy issues.

It remains unclear how effective the hegemonic model of analysis is in explaining media reporting and editorializing, when compared to competing models. A number of questions remain relevant. Do labor leaders, along with other non-state actors, appear regularly in reporting? Are they able to compete, in terms of the frequency with which they are quoted, with business actors? Do business representatives receive greater attention than workers and labor representatives? Past research from Political scientists Brian Schaffner and Patrick Sellers suggests that increased corporate consolidation of media ownership leads to less diversity in news programming.⁵¹ Does that consolidation enable (or guarantee) a more narrow, pro-business coverage of economic public policy? If media outlets are really committed to unequivocally supporting “free market” politics, are such messages the most commonly expressed in reporting on policy issues in question? All of these questions are relevant if one is to adequately come to any conclusions about whether hegemonic explanations retain any significance in explaining the tone of reporting and media editorials.

3. **New Institutionalism and Journalistic Norms**

Scholars within the “new institutionalist” school examine the mass media as a single political institution. Their analyses of reporting are potentially relevant as related to the indexing and hegemonic models. Media organizations, new institutionalists argue, operate according to standardized routines, values, and norms that guide their negotiation of the news with sources, official and otherwise. David

Michael Ryfe identifies some of the main practices that assist in defining the media as a political institution: balance, detachment, objectivity, and the inverted pyramid style of writing. Each one of these Ryfe deems a major “institution” in its own right.⁵²

Critical new institutionalists emphasize journalistic routines and norms as reinforcing the interests of political officials, and potentially business interests. Bartholomew Sparrow, for example, argues that media outlets routinize their reliance on official sources due to the financial pressures to produce consistent profits and produce news within the confines of regularly daily deadlines. The privileging of official sources is seen as standard operating procedure among reporters, who view political officials as the natural agenda setters (via the indexing model’s predictions) in reporting of policy issues. In line with the hegemonic model, Sparrow cites market pressures that operate within media as a major force on editors who are encouraged (perhaps demanded at times?) to take into account the interests of advertisers who finance their news operations.⁵³ Journalist Ben Bagdikian and political scientist Dean Alger also stress the role of market pressures as exercised against editors has been identified in other studies as well, which stress the role that media plays in encouraging consumption in a capitalist society.⁵⁴

Many of the classic observation studies of media reporting over the last few decades identify mainstream media organizations as biased in their reporting of economic and class related issues. Gay Tuchman’s study of journalistic norms and values implicates media outlets in supporting the status quo in their negotiation of the newsworthiness of stories. Reporters, Tuchman found, do not spend significant time searching out grassroots, progressive-left, or radical social figures, but rather depend heavily on official sources.⁵⁵ Herbert Gans stresses the role of “knowns” who gain significant attention in the news, including presidents and presidential candidates, federal officials, state and local representatives and others. Conversely, various “unknowns” sometimes make it into the news, but more so in the case of extravagant or sensational events, and depicted as victims of crimes, disasters, as

voters, and sometimes as protestors. Reporters are distinguished in their commitment to responsible capitalism, and comfortably report events and stories within a continuum of expressible views that ranges from liberal views (on the left) to conservative ones (on the right) and others in between.⁵⁶ Not much space in reporting remains, Gans argues, for those who do not fit within this sphere of legitimate consensus and debate.

Gans claims that “strikes are frequently judged negatively, especially if they inconvenience ‘the public,’ contribute to inflation, or involve violence.” Reporters, he maintains, retain “an optimistic faith that in the good society, businessmen and women will compete with each other in order to create prosperity for all, but that they will refrain from unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers or customers.” “Class groupings” and “class differences are rarely reported,” and “notions of class conflict are outside the journalistic repertoire of concepts.”⁵⁷ Mark Fishman situates journalistic norms and routines within a general economic framework influencing news production and content. He points to economic factors such as the increase in story quotas on individual journalists as encouraging a turn “to reporting pre-formulated and prescheduled events in anticipation of a speed-up of their production line.” On a larger macro-economic level, Fishman suggests, “the overall economic logic of news reporting dictates the minimization of labor costs by understaffing the newsroom.”⁵⁸

While Fishman, Tuchman, and Gans do not openly subscribe to hegemonic media analysis, their focus on news norms and routines and the role they play in reinforcing dominant economic ideologies fits well with a hegemonic outlook. Sparrow claims that advertisers may pressure reporters and editors over stories they file when businesses retain a vested interest in the quality of stories. This claim is addressed in the final section of this dissertation.

Journalistic norms may also play a role in influencing reporting in favor of the assumptions expressed under media indexing. Reporters’ “objective” news routines may play a role in reinforcing political officials’ dominance of public policy debates. The late political communication scholar Timothy Cook

wrote of the “strategic ritual of objectivity,” with journalists tailoring their reporting to the agendas of political officials.⁵⁹ As Cook argued:

In pursuing objectivity, reporters end up implicitly adding a particular bias to the news – a structural bias” toward “concentration on the events, ideas, preoccupations, strategies and politics of powerful officials. The gravitation toward officialdom is what enables the news media to be not merely political, but governmental.⁶⁰

Former *CNN* editor David Mindich defines “objectivity” as including an “ethic of nonpartisanship” in which “reporters must offer ‘both sides’ of each story.”⁶¹ Mindich explains that “both sides” of a political issue are defined via official sources, which are seen as authoritative in driving reporting of public policy debates. More specifically, journalists seek to “balance” their stories by reinforcing a “sphere of legitimate controversy,” which is defined through the ideologies expressed by political officials.⁶² “Balance[d]” journalism “serves the status quo,” as journalists have historically “embraced the idea that one can glean the truth by balancing quotes from figures of authority.”⁶³ Notions of journalistic “balance” and “objectivity” – when dependent upon political officials to set the news agenda – are tantamount to an embrace of the indexing model’s official source bias.

4. “The Liberal Media”

Although commonly supported in popular commentary, a number of scholars also claim that American media are systematically biased on economic policy issues *against* business and Republican interests and in favor of liberal and Democratic perspectives. Conservative commentators such as Anne Coulter, Sean Hannity, and Bernard Goldberg regularly attack American media for slanting their commentary in a liberal direction on issues ranging from the war in Iraq, to coverage of Republicans during elections, to reporting on major economic questions.⁶⁴ Daniel Sutter challenges the claim that corporate advertising pressures help censor reports that are potentially critical of business and conservative interests, suggesting instead that criticisms of American business and conservative views actually *attract* more viewers and contribute to media corporations’ profits and bottom line.⁶⁵ Most of

the popular claims regarding the “liberal media” are derived from the work of a select group of scholars and watchdog groups claiming to have uncovered evidence of such biases.

The “liberal media” claim, while popular in much media and social commentary, is not without its controversy. A number of progressive pundits and scholars question alleged conservative dominance of media.⁶⁶ One meta-analysis of studies of media bias, published in the *Journal of Communication*, found that claims about liberal media bias against Republican political candidates are largely exaggerated. In examining the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections, the meta-analysis found that positive and negative media coverage in major television and print mediums was evenly split between Republican and Democratic candidates, with minor exceptions. While complaints about “liberal media” bias “overwhelmingly dominated” the political discussion in reporting in the late 1980s to mid 1990s, the meta-analysis found that “across all three elections, conservative elites’ claims of liberal media bias appeared in campaign news coverage when the Republican candidate was receiving relatively favorable coverage.”⁶⁷

Regardless of contrary empirical evidence challenging the “liberal media” claim, pundits continue to cite scholarly works claiming that coverage is biased against conservatives. Perhaps the most well known scholarly work proclaiming the liberal media charge is *The Media Elite: America’s New Powerbrokers*. In this study, Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda Lichter examined the political ideologies and dispositions of individual reporters and editors in major news venues across the United States, and juxtaposed those views with those of business leaders. The picture emerging from their study was one that characterized reporters and editors as overwhelmingly liberal on social issues, although more conservative on economic issues (but less conservative on economic issues than business leaders themselves). When they surveyed news workers in the late 1970s, they found that reporters and editors were more likely to describe themselves as liberal, rather than conservative. Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman portrayed journalists as liberal elites, in terms of their income, education, and prestige

levels. Reporters were more likely to cite liberals as a more reliable source on welfare reform, progressive consumer groups as more reliable on consumer protection issues, and environmental activists as more reliable on issues of pollution and the environment. News workers are also described as more likely to vote for Democratic political candidates than Republican ones.⁶⁸ Such Democratic leanings are reinforced by more recent studies.⁶⁹

Some scholars and research groups also challenge claims that entertainment programming should be understood through a cultural hegemonic lens. There is, first and foremost, the well publicized study from the *Media Institute*, “Crooks, Conmen, and Clowns,” released in the early 1980s. After examining two hundred primetime programs on the three major broadcast networks (*ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*) this study found that “two of three businessmen are shown as foolish, greedy or criminal, and that almost half of all work activities performed by businessmen involve illegal acts.”⁷⁰ Subsequent inquiries into characterizations of business characters have produced similar, albeit modified results. Sari Thomas and Steven LeShay reinforced the *Media Institute’s* findings, arguing that fictional programs on the major three networks (in the late 1980s) “routinely portrayed” the “upper class” as “engaging in a greater amount of negative behavior” than those in the “working class.” The authors qualified the *Media Institute* study, however, explaining that it is “wealth, not business leaders,” that “has consistently been portrayed negatively in popular media.”⁷¹

Most recently, political scientist Tim Groseclose argues that most all American media outlets lie far to the left (on a left-right, liberal-conservative spectrum) of the American public. Groseclose’s study measures news references to liberal and conservative think tanks, research groups, and activist and advocacy organizations, and compares that reporting to references to these same groups in the Congressional record from Democratic and Republican officials. Measuring “political quotients” for both a wide variety of media outlets and for members of Congress, he found that media outlets were much more likely than members of Congress to cite liberal groups in their news stories.⁷² Groseclose’s study

was the subject of much contestation among political scientists and media scholars, particularly with regard to the alleged methodology flaws and unrealistic measurement expectations.⁷³ These challenges are not exhaustively reviewed here, although I do incorporate the “liberal media” model into the list of competing media models that I test in this dissertation.

A final reason to seriously consider the “liberal media” model follows from its strong popularity among the general public. A mid-2009 study by the *Pew Research Center* found that the public’s “accuracy rating” of the press has hit a “two decades low.” Part of the reason, the study found, may be because a plurality of citizens think the media is increasingly liberally biased. While 41% of Americans thought the media was liberally biased in 1985, the number had increased to 50% by July 2009.⁷⁴ Distrust of media as “liberal” is likely related to the continued efforts of Republicans, conservatives, and media pundits (on *Fox News*, conservative radio, and from conservative think tanks) who consistently stress that journalists are personally liberal, and that their ideology interferes with their ability to fairly report issues in a balanced way.

5. The Pluralist Model: Emerging Media Diversity?

Up until this point, this chapter has offered polarized interpretations of media coverage as either tilting toward government and official viewpoints (indexing and hegemony), or heavily critical of political and business leaders (“liberal media” claims). There does exist, however, another alternative explanation for media reporting of economic issues. What I refer to here as the “pluralist” model of reporting offers a middle ground approach, in that it characterizes media as attempting to strike a balance between competing forces, allowing for the expression of a wide variety of voices and interests.

Political Scientist Robert Dahl stands at the forefront of the pluralist school of analysis of American politics. In *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, Dahl summarized his study of a single urban locale: New Haven, Connecticut, in his attempt to uncover basic details about the

nature of the city's governing structure. Dahl was primarily concerned with whether "the way in which political resources are distributed [regarding the city's government] encourage oligarchy or pluralism?" Within a pluralist democracy, Dahl explained, "the relationship between leaders and citizens...is frequently reciprocal: leaders influence the decisions of constituents, but the decisions of leaders are also determined in part by what they think are, will be, or have been the preferences of their constituents."⁷⁵ Dahl was primarily concerned with government officials and the question of business dominance of government, rather than with interest group empowerment in the political process. Nonetheless, his contribution to pluralism remains relevant to a school of thought which has become increasingly interested in the role of non-state actors as an empowered political force.

While Dahl did not emphasize non-state actors, an emerging literature focuses on media coverage of labor groups, the anti-corporate globalization movement, and businesses. This literature explores the possibility that coverage is heavily pluralistic in orientation. Media coverage of the anti-corporate globalization movement has been described as pluralistic in the heavy influence that is exercised by demonstrators. Andrew Rojecki sketches a picture of "a much more favorable media environment for the anti-globalization movement," tracing an "initial focus on surface features [of the 1999 WTO protest] – costumes and stunts," that "quickly deepened to the underlying issues they symbolized. Rojecki highlights media openness to attacks on the WTO as "undemocratic," "cloaked in secrecy," "pandering to business interests," and characterizations of the organization as intent on global "domination" "imperialist intervention," and promoting "profits uber alles."⁷⁶ Another study by DeLuca and Peebles examining the anti-corporate globalization movement uncovered evidence that the sustained efforts of protestors to disrupt business meetings have resulted in more favorable coverage, even allowing protestors to overshadow government and business officials in some instances.⁷⁷ My initial research on the anti-corporate globalization movement uncovers similar findings.⁷⁸

Public effectiveness in gaining media attention for progressive causes appears to be influenced, in many instances, by the level of organization of the groups or movements in question. Through a materialist analysis, Trevor Thrall emphasizes the success of interest groups in gaining media attention based upon the size of their membership and their economic resources. Major assets that assisted in gaining increased media attention include: money, staff size, reputation, expertise, and name recognition, among others.⁷⁹ While many grassroots progressive groups may be at a disadvantage with regard to their difficulty in raising large sums of money, they are often able to compensate for this weakness by organizing larger numbers of members – thereby securing greater media attention.

Labor unions' strength in membership and funding resources may play a significant role in pressuring government officials (at the local, state, and national level) to adopt progressive policy reforms. Jarol Manheim traces the progression of labor power in American politics in the last few decades, as it seeks to tackle issues of "corporate greed," "corporate welfare" "corporate crime," and corporate "corruption."⁸⁰ The New Left (of which labor is a major part) has undertaken a "corporate campaign" aimed at promoting corporate social responsibility and encouraging government to strengthen welfare state protections for the poor and disadvantaged.⁸¹ How successful labor groups are in utilizing "free media"⁸² (including the reports of television and print media) when advocating on policy issues, however, is unclear.

Manheim documents the rapid decline of union membership over the last five decades, from a high in the 1950s and 1960s in which over 30 percent of all workers were union members, to a low in the 1980s onward with fewer than 15 percent retained union representation. Union power in initiating strikes has also fallen dramatically; while the number of major strikes in the U.S. averaged between 450 to 500 a year in the 1950s, that number began to decline in the 1970s, and through the turn of the millennium reached a low of less than 50 major strikes per year.⁸³ Such a dramatic downturn in union membership and power may translate into less power to influence public agendas and media reporting.

However, unions may still be effective on some level in pursuing their agenda, despite the losses discussed above. Whether that power also translates into the ability to cultivate reporters and media outlets is not known.

What is currently known is that, despite its marked decline in recent decades, labor unions have been able to win important victories in the realm of negotiating for higher wages. Scholarly studies of labor's success in the 1997 UPS strike demonstrate workers' ability to garner sympathetic media coverage for its actions, largely as a result of sustained activism and successful public relations campaigns. Christopher Erickson's and Daniel Mitchell's examination of strike events from the late 1940s through early 1990s found that strikes that lasted longer were consistently more likely to gain more media coverage.⁸⁴ While this finding may be intuitive, other studies find that union success in winning favorable media attention may be determined by how effective unions are in appealing to the public and in promoting social justice frames.

In his study of the 1997 UPS strike, Christopher Martin argues that "many mainstream news media dropped their typical consumer-oriented frames for telling stories about labor and instead presented a range of opinions about the status of part-time workers in the economy [a major complaint of UPS workers was the shortage of full-time jobs available from the company], the years of downsizing at U.S. corporations, and the question of fair wages."⁸⁵ Although he generally agrees with hegemonic conceptions of media as serving class and business interests,⁸⁶ Martin concedes that workers may successfully organize in order to force their way into more sympathetic news coverage. Similarly, Charlotte Ryan deconstructs the UPS strike, in order to determine precisely what tactics employed by labor were successful in attaining more positive media coverage. Ryan reviews the UPS strike as a collective victory for labor, exploring how workers came together to exploit various "crack" or "narrow opportunities" in mass media reporting so as to promote a positive image of labor as in need of a raise and deserving fairer working conditions.⁸⁷

It is Deepa Kumar's study, however, that provides the most empirical examination of how UPS workers effectively cultivated media sources. Teamsters succeeded in "breaking through" to mainstream America, winning impressive levels of sympathy from the American public, accompanied by some resistance from various media outlets.⁸⁸ Kumar found the *USA Today* and *NBC* to be the least sympathetic to the UPS strikers, relying overwhelmingly on shallow coverage that failed to examine at greater length the concrete grievances of union members. The *Washington Post* and *CBS* were seen somewhere in between – not necessarily consistently antagonistic to the UPS strike, but not heavily emphasizing worker grievances either. Finally, the *New York Times* and *ABC* were depicted as the most open to the plight of UPS workers, although clearly not crusading for their cause. The *New York Times* was more likely to quote Teamster sources, for example, than *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*, while *ABC* was more likely to stress the public's sympathy with the strike. *NBC* was more likely to emphasize sporadic picket line violence, in a sensationalistic manner.⁸⁹

Perhaps the most powerful empirical validation of media pluralism is observed in the research of interest group scholar Jeffrey Berry. Berry presents extensive evidence that citizen interest groups play a vital role in influencing media reporting. In his book, *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups*, Berry samples television news in the mid 1990s from *ABC*, *CBS*, *CNN*, and *NBC*, and finds that interest groups are referenced 847 times in the 295 newscasts he examines. This amounts to a significant 2.9 groups referenced per newscast.⁹⁰ Additionally, Berry finds that the most common groups referenced are citizens' interest groups (at 45.6 percent of all references), whereas corporations are referenced in 24.3% of newscasts, and trade associations are referenced in 13% of newscasts).⁹¹ These findings suggest that citizens groups, rather than corporations, may be the dominant group in much of reporting. Berry's study, in addition to the ones I have already referenced, suggest that there is significant evidence of media pluralism in U.S. reporting. Berry himself argues that there exists an

“enormous over-representation of citizen groups” in news coverage, despite the fact that “they are but a small part of the lobbying population.”⁹²

C. Assessing Alternative Media Models

This literature review emphasized the numerous competing models utilized to account for the content of media coverage, as related to economic public policy disputes. Four models were examined: indexing, hegemony, liberal media, and pluralism. Many different studies were referenced, although some of those studies remain more relevant for my research project than others. With regards to media hegemony, few of the studies examined offered a systematic examination of how business pressures may operate across many policy disputes. As a result of this lack of generalizability, I spend little time dissecting any specific hegemonic study, but rather seek to present my own comprehensive series of tests for evaluating hegemonic claims.

With regard to media pluralism, Berry’s study remains the most central of all pluralist studies, in that it presents the most comprehensive look at how media incorporate non-state actors across a variety of issues. My study attempts to present similarly generalizable findings, although I am only able to examine six policy disputes, rather than the entire universe of policy disputes. Most indexing studies above remain only tangentially important to my analysis, since they emphasize foreign policy issues, rather than domestic ones. As a result, few of those studies will be referenced directly throughout the rest of this work. To the extent that previous indexing studies remain directly relevant here, Zaller and Chiu’s notions of “source indexing” and “power indexing” appear most relevant in my review of reporting on domestic policy. More specifically, I dissect how the quoting of different sources influences the content of policy debates, while also looking at how various events (elections producing different partisan regimes in control of government) may also influence media content.

As related to the liberal media model, Groseclose's study is probably the most directly important to my research. As the most recent in a long line of liberal media studies, Groseclose's book has gained the most attention as of late, likely due to the claim that his research represents a systematic analysis of media bias across many policy areas. Groseclose's study, however, fails to examine alleged media bias across different partisan government regimes. This study corrects for this oversight, measuring how the partisan composition of government may remain relevant for the content reported in the news.

Each of the four models discussed above may better account for media coverage of economic policy debates. Whether one (or a few) of the models are more helpful in predicting the nature of coverage can only be determined by further empirical inquiry. In this project, I undertake a systematic analysis of national and local media attention to the six policy issues discussed in this chapter, examining coverage over a 13 year period from 1996 through 2009. I am aware of no scholarly study that assesses all four competing media models discussed above alongside each other. As a result, few conclusions can be adequately drawn in regards to the alleged biases in the mediated debates over economic policy reforms.

Notes

¹ Adam Clymer, "Republicans Told to Brace for Vote on the Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 18 April 1996, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C00E3DB1E39F93BA25757C0A960958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>

² Editorial, "A Deal on the Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 24 April 2007, sec. 1, 24.

³ Benjamin I. Page, "The Mass Media as Political Actors," *Political Science and Politics*, 29, no. 1 (March 1996), 20.

⁴ Page, "The Mass Media as Political Actors," 21, 22.

⁵ James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, *Agenda Setting* (London: Sage, 1996); Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Longman, 2003); Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

⁶ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, No. 4 (1993), 51-58; Irving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1986); Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); Pippa Norris, Marion R. Just, and Montague Kern, eds. *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public* (London: Routledge, 2003); Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

⁷ Amy E. Jasperson, Dhavan V. Shah, Mark Watts, Ronald J. Faber, and David P. Fan, "Framing and the Public Agenda: Media Effects on the Importance of the Federal Budget Deficit," *Political Communication* 15, No. 2 (1998), 205-224.

⁸ Jukka Pietilainen, "Foreign News and Foreign Trade," *International Communication Gazette* 68, No. 3 (2006), 217-228.

⁹ Douglas A. Van Belle, "Bureaucratic Responsiveness to the News Media: Comparing the Influence of the New York Times and Network Television News Coverage on U.S. Foreign Aid," *Political Communication*, 20, no. 3 (2003): 263-285; Douglas A. Van Belle, Jean-Sebastien Rioux, and David M. Potter, *Media, Bureaucracies, and Foreign Aid: A Comparative Analysis of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 50, 135, 137-146.

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III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I set out my research design and provide specific methodological justifications the media outlets examined, hypotheses developed, and issues chosen. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the broader importance of studying mass media and politics, and for the relevance of the specific policy issues studied. I specifically explain the significance of the issues chosen in terms of the ability to generalize from them about larger media political patterns that exist in American society. Next I discuss the arguments made on each side of the six policy debates, as well as the timelines of analysis for each issue. Understanding the positions driving each policy debate, as well as the general context surrounding each issue, is vital prior to engaging in a competent analysis of those issues. I also briefly describe the individual news outlets that I examined, exploring their broader importance in terms of generalizing about media coverage across the board. Finally, I explore the four models established in Chapter 1, lay out a number of hypotheses for testing each model, and establish thresholds for assessing each model's effectiveness (or lack thereof) in terms of each model's predictive power.

A. The Broader Significance of the Mass Media and Politics

Media coverage of economic policy issues is crucial at a time when most Americans have little personal contact with political leaders and the political system. Because of the public's lack of direct experience with the policy process, mass media serve a vital role by providing the people with most of their information on national and global issues. Political leaders rely on and utilize media outlets in order to communicate the promised benefits of their policy proposals to politically interested persons, while attempting to convey the perceived drawbacks of their political enemies' proposals. Media outlets disseminate political messages and ideas, and provide an important venue for intra and inter-party communication of ideas and positions.

Recognizing the importance of media, communication scholars differ in their interpretations of how media report political issues. Scholars employ competing frameworks for understanding media reporting on public policy and the economy, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1. Upon surveying the major works of scholarship in this field from the last few decades, I found four models that represent primary vantage points through which scholars understand reporting of government economic policy. These models all centrally deal with the question of what role the government and media play with regard to regulation of the private economy, business persons, and private markets. The four models, again, include: 1. The hegemonic model, which assumes that reporters cover economic policy issues in a way that is favorable to business interests. Such favorable coverage is therefore seen as a function of pressures brought upon journalists by a private, for profit media system; 2. The indexing model, which assumes that reporters cover economic policy by molding their reporting to fit the debates already taking place between political officials. Journalists are seen as “indexing” the views expressed in their reports to those already being expressed by political elites; 3. The liberal media model, which assumes that reporters share personal liberal biases that inevitably translate into liberal biases in coverage of economic public policy issues that discriminate against Republican actors and conservative points of view; and 4. The pluralistic model, which assumes that reporters do their best to effectively balance many different types of sources, including governmental and non-governmental sources, liberal and conservative points of view, and public interest and private interest group actors. In light of the large number of competing models, there is no shortage of controversy regarding interpretations of how media cover government economic policy.

My dissertation systematically tests the four scholarly models described above by analyzing six specific public policy issues related to the broader economy. I chose to focus on economic issues, not because they reveal any more about media framing or bias than could be revealed by analyzing political or social issues or military conflicts. Instead, I emphasize the economy because this area has been

understudied in past academic research, and the answer to the question of which of the four models above best explains coverage remains uncertain. To date, there has yet to be a systematic empirical study of a large sample of economic issues that assesses the viability of the four models against each other. The generalizability of this study, then, will largely be restricted to questions of how media report on economic public policy. The study also has the potential, however, to provide holistic answers to how media report on the economy. I am aware of no previous studies have been able to accomplish this goal as of yet.

B. The Six Policy Debates

The six issues I analyze include: the minimum wage increases of 1996 and 2007, the 2001 Congressional tax cuts, the 2005 debate over privatizing Social Security, the 2009 controversy over publicly funded Wall Street bonuses, and the 2009 “stimulus” bill promoted by the Obama administration. These issues are interrelated in that they all address the question of government interference in private markets and the economy. Collectively, these issues relate to the costs private actors pay, and the benefits they reap, in the public policy process. Implementation of the minimum wage raises the question of whether businesses will incur additional costs in terms of their operating expenses. Debate over the Bush administration’s tax cuts was defined by criticisms that affluent Americans were the largest beneficiaries, and support based on the assumption that the cuts would promote economic growth. The privatization of Social Security relates to the larger issue of the government’s role in promoting private investment in the stock market, and over whether it is the government’s responsibility to provide for socialized programs in the name of promoting the public good. The CEO bonus debate relates to discussions of what role the taxpayers and government play in subsidizing private economic actors (the bonuses were funded with taxpayer TARP, or “bailout” money), and whether government should become involved in regulating pay in private, for-profit corporations.

Finally, the Obama stimulus debate relates back to the question of whether the government can and should take positive steps to stimulate economic development during times of instability and crisis. All six of the above issues are connected in that they deal more generally with the costs and benefits of proposed economic policies to business actors operating in the private economy. They all represent major public policy debates that defined a generation, politically and economically speaking.

My research indicates that media coverage of the issues addressed in this dissertation have been neglected in a published academic studies. I chose these six policy areas because they represent a diverse number of issues, and allow for better generalizability in explaining how mass media cover political economy. These six issues are interconnected in that they are delineated by a clear liberal-conservative divide, where on the one hand Republicans and conservatives argue against government intervention in “free markets.” Businesses are thought to function more effectively without political interference, from the pro-business, conservative-Republican perspective. On the other hand, Democrats and liberals consistently maintain that government should, and must, play a vital role in regulating industry for the benefit of all, and that the political system should seek to address issues such as poverty reduction and social welfare, even if it costs the wealthy and private corporations more in taxes and operating expenses respectively. Additionally, many on the liberal left are characterized as taking positions that are (at times) seen as anti-business, or at the very least as placing strong restrictions on the “free market” and American businesses.

The six economic issues examined herein are excellent cases for testing whether mass media deliberation is systematically biased in favor of liberal or conservative positions, or if some other type of bias exists. The policy disputes in question represent *major* disagreements between the parties, and were hallmark conflicts, defining a generation of liberal and conservative political leaders in Congress. Many of the issues chosen remain relevant today – such as tax cuts, the minimum wage, and stimulus spending – in that they are *continually reoccurring* in public policy debates, as witnessed over the last

few decades, and are still the subject to strong partisan and ideological disagreement. The minimum wage, for example, appears every decade as a contentious policy issue, while questions about taxes and government regulation of the economy are seldom out of news headlines, regardless of the period in question.

The issues I chose are also relevant because they cover a lengthy period of history – 13 years. Examining a range of issues playing out over time allows for greater generalization of this study's findings. A pattern that emerges over a period of nearly a decade and a half reveals more about long term patterns of reporting than patterns observed over only a few years. Simply reporting on one or two issues allows for little in terms of generalizing about how media report on a broad array of economic policy issues.

My six issues were selected in part because they were the subject of significant media and political attention across a period of months (sometimes as long as six months each), and were characterized by intense partisan conflict among Democrats and Republicans in Congress, and liberal and conservative interest groups. The public reported paying close attention to these issues as well; the economy became the major issue of focus during 2008 and 2009, and issues such as tax cuts, Social Security, and the minimum wage are considered highly salient by polling organizations, with public opinion on each being regularly surveyed.¹ Scholars understand that the mass media play a vital role in influencing what issues the public thinks about and how they think about those issues.²

C. Philosophical Significance

Historically, the policy issues I chose fit into a larger narrative and economic debate regarding neoliberal, "free market" approaches and social welfare/Keynesian strategies. Free market approaches, as advocated by economists such as Milton Friedman, frame government regulation of the economy as stifling growth, profits, and entrepreneurial creativity. In contrast, Keynesian economists argue that the

federal government plays a vital, perhaps *the* critical role, in ensuring economic prosperity. Keynesian spending is typically closely associated with Democratic administrations (such as the FDR and Obama administrations), which both supported social welfare spending as another way to aid workers during economic downturns. Keynesian economists and social welfare supporters argue that the government needs to promote deficit spending and subsidies directed at the masses and poor during economic downturns, in order to stimulate demand for goods and services at times when businesses are shedding jobs and cutting expenditures and costs.

As mentioned above, the six issues in question are delineated across a liberal-conservative political spectrum. This dissertation does not take normative positions on whether liberal or conservative opinions on issues are more or less desirable. Rather, it simply seeks to analyze how competing ideological positions are covered in media reporting and editorializing, and whether one point of view and one set of actors is favored over another.

D. Liberal-Conservative Arguments Regarding Each Policy Issue

All of the policy issues examined here are grounded in longstanding historical and ideological conflicts. The minimum wage has been an issue of debate since its establishment in 1938, as it is considered by Democrats and labor to be a vital tool for reducing poverty and increasing worker prosperity. The minimum wage was established during the worst economic downturn of the twentieth century as a fundamental component of the redistributive social welfare state. Conversely, conservatives, Republicans and free market supporters have long attacked the minimum wage as distorting the economy and increasing unemployment and inflation. The stimulus also fits historically within this debate, as part of “Keynesian” strategies designed to promote economic stability and recovery during tough economic times. The executive pay controversy is relevant within the larger conflict between liberals and conservatives over the alleged positive and negative effects of government

regulation of the private sector. Such regulatory, interventionist government approaches stand in contrast to “free market” approaches which frame government intervention (at least in terms of rhetoric) as inappropriate for addressing economic problems. Attacks on the stimulus frame the growing deficits resulting from Keynesian and welfare spending as a creating crippling debt that will ultimately hurt the U.S. economy and future generations.

Debates over Social Security and tax cuts also speak to neoliberal, “free market” approaches and social welfare approaches, in that the former claims that government should reduce its influence on people’s lives, while the latter envisions government coordination of welfare programs as vital to the common good. Creation of individual retirement accounts to replace the collectively-based Social Security program is seen by conservatives as empowering individuals (rather than government) to choose for themselves how they want to invest their retirement money. Similarly, tax cuts are framed as a way to get government out of our lives by allowing consumers to keep a greater portion of their income and use it to stimulate the economy. In contrast, social welfare supporters on the liberal-left identify Social Security as a historically successful government-based program that has reduced poverty and provided for the common good. It is seen as providing a collective safety net to protect all citizens in a way that would not be possible if individuals were responsible only for their own retirement and if individuals lose their retirement savings after sustaining losses in declining or collapsing markets.

The six issue-debates I chose are also useful because they are delineated by various governing party regimes that exercised control over Congress and the White House when each was debated. The indexing thesis (which I will explore in more detail in my hypotheses section) argues that the tone of reporting on major policy issues is “indexed” to the spectrum of ideological views being expressed by government officials. If this model is accurate in predicting media coverage of domestic issues, one would expect that the views expressed in news stories to change significantly when different parties control government. In order to conduct a fair and effective test of the indexing model (in comparison

with the liberal and hegemonic models that will also be discussed below), I constructed a research design that captures different periods of partisan control of government. These periods include: Democratic control of Congress and the presidency (during the 2009 bonuses controversy and the 2009 stimulus); Republican control of Congress and the presidency (during the 2001 tax cuts and the 2005 Social Security debate); and split control of both Congress and the presidency (during the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage). Partisan control of government may exert considerable influence over the tone of coverage if the indexing hypothesis is correct, whereas partisan control of government should have little to no influence over the biases in coverage (across all issues) if the liberal, pluralistic, or hegemonic approaches are more accurate predictors of media content.

Having explored in depth the theoretical reasons for analyzing these specific policy issues, I turn to the specific details of each debate. The timeline of analysis below will explore the development of each policy issue across time, and explore why I chose the time periods I did for each analysis.

E. Timeline of Analysis

I chose the specific timelines for each policy issue because they represented the periods during which debate over each issue expanded rapidly, peaked, and then declined. In the six policy debates, I begin my analysis during the periods when the salience for each issue was dramatically increasing in reporting and editorializing. This early period of each policy debate represents the time in which each issue was being established as a serious topic of debate among political officials. My timeline of analysis for the issues ends when the political debate declines in salience and in news headlines, either because the policy proposals were successfully passed, or because they failed to pass, and were dropped as issues on the political agenda. The periods of analyses start during the initial establishment period, in which each news outlet began to provide sustained coverage (“sustained” being defined as the publishing of more than a dozen stories on it per month), and ends when the policy issue recedes from

the Congressional agenda (“recede” being defined as the period in which coverage falls to less than a dozen stories per month).

For the minimum wage, my analyses cover the periods from the onset of debates to the passage of wage increases during 1996 and 2007. The 1996 minimum wage analysis spans from the beginning of January, when debate over the wage increase became a regular staple of coverage, through August 31, when President Bill Clinton signed the increase into law. The 2007 minimum wage analysis starts at the beginning of January, after Democrats gained seats from the 2006 midterm Congressional election and made a minimum wage increase one of their most important policy priorities. Analysis reaches through the end of May, 2007, when the minimum wage was signed into law. Examination of the 2001 tax cuts starts at the beginning of January, when discussion of the merits and drawbacks of the policy began to grow in advance of George W. Bush taking office as president. Analysis ends in May of 2001, when a tax cut bill was passed in Congress and signed into law by the president.

My study of the Congressional debate over creation of private retirement accounts for Social Security begins in January of 2005. It was during this month that former President Bush escalated his discussion of Social Security, following his 2004 electoral victory and attempt to use the “political capital” he had earned to pursue Social Security reform. Analysis extends through the end of May 2005, at which time it was clear that President Bush was not able to push through his reform plan. It was during this month that Republican Congressional Representative Roy Blunt listed the “priority legislation” that was to be pursued after Memorial Day; Social Security was not included on the list.

My analysis of the 2008-2009 economic crisis encompasses two issues: the executive bonuses controversy, and the Democratic stimulus. The executive bonuses controversy became increasingly prominent from January through March 2009, following the initiation of the TARP “bailout,” and once it had become clear that much of the taxpayer money granted to banks and financial firms had not been used to “restore liquidity” but had been paid out in bonuses³ to corporate executives on Wall Street.³

Analysis begins at the beginning of January 2009, and culminates in March, at which time the Obama administration announced and the Democratic Congress passed new rules to regulate CEO and executive compensation. Finally, the examination of the stimulus begins at the start of January of 2009, when Democrats in Congress began to negotiate the stimulus in anticipation of President Obama taking office. The analysis ends in late March 2009, when the stimulus was passed into law.

F. Significance of Media Sources

This study includes five different media sources: the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Sun Times*, *CBS News*, *Fox News* cable, and *MSNBC*. Articles and transcripts from these organizations are available from the Lexis Nexis academic database. The theoretical significance of including each source is discussed briefly in Table I, as well as below. These mediums were chosen in order to better generalize about media coverage of public policy and the economy. In total, nearly 2,000 op-eds, transcripts, and editorials were examined in this research, and more than 1,500 articles were included in my content analysis. The stories within arise from a mix of regional and national print outlets, which typically appeal to more elite readers, and television news, which either appeal to mass audiences or engage in narrowcasting (seeking to appeal to small, focused audiences, in this case more liberal and conservative audiences).

TABLE I

NEWS SOURCES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE	
News Outlet	Importance of the Source for this Study
<i>New York Times</i>	Agenda setting national newspaper; Other news outlets (T.V. and print) take cues from this “paper of record”
<i>CBS News</i>	Broadcast News leader, mass appeal for “average” news viewers
<i>Fox News/MSNBC</i>	Privileged, relatively elite audiences (subscription based); narrowcasting to partisan and ideological bases of both parties
<i>Chicago Sun Times</i>	Local newspaper audiences, wire service based stories representative of local news across the country

Editorials, op-eds, and news articles from the national news sections of each paper were examined. The *New York Times* was chosen because it is the most prominent newspaper in the country. Although it only enjoys less than one million daily readers, as the “paper of record,” it is responsible for much of the original reporting on public policy issues, and is closely followed by other print, television, and online sources across the country. Studies demonstrate that the *New York Times* “sets the agenda” for what policy issues will be discussed in the United States.⁴

I selected the *Chicago Sun Times* because it serves as one of the major sources of news for the Chicago metropolitan area, and is representative of local print news across the entire country. Although

this paper only benefits from a daily circulation of over 312,000, it is listed in the top 100 newspapers in the country. Additionally, and most importantly, it pulls most of its stories on national policy issues from news wire services such as *Reuters* and the *Associated Press*. By selecting this outlet, I am able to generalize not only about the types of stories in which Chicago readers are exposed, but also about those consumed by other outlets relying on wire services which operate across the nation. *CBS News* was chosen because it represents a news medium (broadcast television news) that directly appeals to Americans on a far wider level than elite print news. *CBS, ABC, and NBC* news combined were viewed by approximately 25 million Americans per day as of 2008.⁵ Any generalization about mass media reporting needs to take into account such a vital medium of communication in order to assess the state of media coverage of the economy (and the effects of that coverage on public attitudes).

In my analysis of editorials and commentary, I expand my list of newspapers surveyed beyond simply the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. It is difficult to generalize about media commentary across the country with such a small number of venues. Also included in my supplementary analysis are editorials from four regional and national newspapers: the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. All four are major national newspapers, with significant readerships. Most importantly, though, I selected these outlets because of their reputation for being more conservative in their editorializing, compared to the more liberal positions expressed in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. Including both liberal and conservative newspapers is vital for any study seeking to fairly analyze the full spectrum of political commentary in the United States. Additional commentary analyzed for each of the policy debates appears from television cable pundits who appear on *Fox News* and *MSNBC*. I review the positions of a variety of pundits, including (for *Fox News*) Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck (formerly of *Fox*), and Sean Hannity, and (for *MSNBC*) Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann (formerly of *MSNBC*), and Ed Schultz.

I include cable news outlets *Fox News* and *MSNBC* in my analyses because they represent a newer type of media that narrowcasts to partisan audiences, appealing to a combined prime time audience of 3 million per night as of early 2009 (2 million for Fox and 1 million for MSNBC).⁶ While *Fox News* and *MSNBC* are not each followed exclusively by conservatives and liberals respectively, they are widely understood to appeal to news audiences based upon their ideological biases. Including news outlets that narrowcast is important in order to better generalize about the state of today's media reporting of economic policy. These organizations must also be examined in order to determine whether the partisan bias of these outlets are exaggerated, or whether such outlets represent (in terms of their coverage) a significant deviation from the content reported in "objective" news organizations.

There is an additional justification for including both television and print news. Empirical evidence indicates that television and print news sources contribute to citizens' learning about political issues in different ways; audiences that are less interested in politics learn more about political issues from television news stories, whereas those with more political interest tend to learn more from newspaper stories.⁷ In short, different news audiences learn differently from following different types of media. Accounting for the various ways in which economic policies are framed in both television and print stories is a necessary first step if one is to understand the nature of the public debate on political economy issues, and if one is to accurately gauge the effects of media consumption for different types of news outlets.

G. Research Design: Hypotheses for Four Media Models

This dissertation approaches the study of media in a number of ways. These include quantitative and qualitative content analysis for news stories, editorials, and op-eds. I undertook content analysis for my six issues, with the assistance of four other coders, who examined between 15 to 30 percent of the total sample of articles for each news outlet analyzed.

From my literature review, I found four different approaches that are used for studying media, public policy, and the economy. These include: economic, indexing, pluralistic, and liberal media models. Before briefly exploring these approaches, it is first necessary to describe the competing arguments which will be subject to content analysis – arguments that are commonly made by supporters and opponents of each public policy issue.

I broke down each of the six policy issues according to three major arguments made in favor of, and three major arguments made against each policy proposal in question. These policy positions are divided along the liberal-conservative ideological spectrum, in which Republican officials take conservative positions and Democratic officials appropriate liberal positions. The three positions on each side of the six policy debates are, generally speaking, considered more favorable and less favorable to each policy proposal. Republican-conservative positions are friendlier to business interests and “market” solutions, whereas Democratic-liberal positions are more critical of business interests and “market” solutions.

The arguments for each side were arrived upon after closely following debates on these issues between members of Congress and the Executive, and after examining relevant reports from various think tanks that take liberal and conservative positions on such issues. I included various arguments made in favor of or against each policy initiative because I found they were consistently voiced by either the president and his executive staff, major members of Congress, or by those at prominent think tanks, after a preliminary analysis of news stories pulled from the Lexis Nexis database, and after reading a variety of reports from think tanks covering each issue.

Basing my analysis on the major arguments made by political officials is necessary because of the widespread understanding among political communication scholars that political officials are the primary actors shaping debates about public policy issues.⁸ Conducting my analysis along liberal-conservative lines is also necessary because political scientists increasingly understand national political

debates as taking place primarily along a left-right continuum, and according to a liberal-conservative spectrum of ideas.⁹

The major liberal and conservative contours for each policy debate are explored at length in the section below:

1. Debate Over the Minimum Wage

Three major conservative arguments appear with regard to Republican opposition to the minimum wage. They include the following:

- The “unemployment effects” frame, which sees increasing the minimum wage as causing a growth in unemployment and job loss among low-wage workers.
- The “tax cuts” frame, which argues that increases in the minimum wage should not be entertained without increased tax cuts for businesses, so as to offset the increases costs of the raise.
- The “labor pandering” frame, which attacks Democrats that supported the minimum wage for allegedly being under the control of labor interests.

Pro minimum wage, liberal arguments are well represented by the following three Democratic claims:

- The “no unemployment effects” frame, which highlights studies suggesting that it is unclear whether the minimum wage is accompanied by increases in unemployment.
- The “common man” frame, which envisions minimum wage increases as needed to supplement workers’ salaries, due to stagnating and declining wages and as a result of the declining value of the dollar.
- The “stagnation-inflation” frame, which portrays the minimum wage as beneficial in helping American workers and families, and in reducing poverty.

2. **Debate Over Tax Cuts:**

Liberal anti-tax cut arguments include the following three Democratic positions:

- The “alternative spending” frame, which depicts cuts as too large and as unacceptably eliminating a budget surplus that could be used for welfare spending in areas such as Medicare, Medicaid, or Social Security.
- The “class war” driven argument, which depicts tax cuts as unacceptable because they go disproportionately to the wealthy.
- The “cost” frame, which draws attention to the goal of reducing the deficit and debt, over the competing priority of cutting taxes.

In contrast, conservative pro-tax cut arguments include the following three conservative positions:

- The “economic stability” frame, which sees tax cuts as desirable because they help stimulate the economy and prevent economic deterioration and recession.
- The “relief” frame, which claims that tax cuts are beneficial to citizens because working Americans need relief from unacceptably and excessively high taxes.
- The “big government” frame, which includes references to the national government as unacceptably large in size and scope, and as needing to be reduced in order to better represent the needs of the public.

3. **Debate Over Social Security**

Liberal, anti-privatization arguments are defined according to the following Democratic claims:

- The “privatization” frame, which critically depicts President Bush’s campaign as intent on dismantling Social Security as a collective, socialized safety net program.

- The “manufactured crisis” frame, which rejects the conservative-Republican claim that Social Security was going “bankrupt.” The frame contended that Social Security was not in danger of going insolvent, noting that the program would pay out planned benefits until 2042.
- The “cost” frame, which highlights the extensive government and taxpayer expenses involved in promoting individual investment accounts, while also meeting current obligations for Social Security retirees.

Conservative, pro-privatization arguments are defined through the following Republican positions:

- The “personal” frame, which depicts individual accounts as providing for the empowerment of those who invest their retirements funds in the stock market.
- The “bankruptcy” frame, which portrays Social Security as is in danger in terms of its alleged inability (in the future) to pay out retirement benefit obligations.
- The “future generations” frame, which focuses on the need to promote reform in order to better provide for children and families in the future.

4. Debate over the Stimulus

Conservative, anti-stimulus arguments are defined by the following Republican claims:

- The “taxes” frame, which depicts government stimulus as unacceptably contributing to a greater taxpayer burden in the future.
- The “borrowing” frame, which claims that government stimulus will lead to greater, unsustainable levels of government borrowing.
- The “big government” frame, which contends that government is already too big and extra spending on pork barrel projects is a waste of resources.

Liberal, pro-stimulus arguments include the Democratic following positions:

- The “infrastructure” frame, which emphasizes the benefits of government stimulus in various areas of infrastructural development, such as roads, bridges, education, and other areas.
- The “economic stability” frame, which highlights the necessity of government stimulus for improving the economy, and preventing further decline.
- The “main street” frame, which addresses references to government stimulus as benefitting American workers, the unemployed, and others in need.

5. **Debate Over Executive Pay**

Conservative, anti-regulation of pay arguments includes three Republican claims:

- The “Republican-Wall Street” frame, which includes any discussion of regulating pay from the perspective of Republicans or business representatives – the vast majority of which are opposed to government regulation of executive pay.
- The “necessity” frame, which is characterized by references to taxpayer funded bonuses as necessary in order to recruit or retain talented Wall Street executives.
- The “economic instability” frame, which depicts regulation of pay as causing potential destabilization of Wall Street firms at a time when they are already experiencing strong volatility.

Liberal, pro-regulation of pay arguments include the following Democratic claims:

- The “Democratic backlash” frame, which includes any discussions of regulation of pay from the Democratic perspective – which is overwhelmingly supportive of regulation.
- The “regulatory-reliance” frame, which includes references to Wall Street executives’ reliance on taxpayer dollars as the funding source for many bonuses. That reliance

potentially opens up executives to attacks from taxpayers and possible regulations in the name of protecting taxpayer dollars.

- The “populist” frame, which includes discussions of popular anger at Wall Street for paying out (what are perceived as) unwarranted bonuses during a time of economic hardship.

H. Prerequisites for Story and Article Selection

The standards for selecting stories on each public policy issue were simple. Print newspaper stories were included in my analysis if story headlines indicated that they were related to the policy issue at hand. Television stories were similarly chosen using this standard. Cable television outlets, however, posed a particular challenge, since they included many different stories, rather than simply focusing on the individual policy issues with which I am concerned. For these stories, I was careful to only select stories that included repeated references to the policy issue in question. For public policy issues that were debated for an extended period of time (nearly six months), the number of stories with individual references to the issue at hand were often so numerous as to make an analysis of all stories unfeasible. In these cases, I selected only stories that included at least four references to the key words chosen for each case study. Policy issues defined by shorter debate periods included cable stories with fewer references to the key words in question (sometimes as little as one), so as to provide for an adequate sample of stories for my analysis. The key words used for each study include the following:

- For the minimum wage: any stories that include the words “minimum wage.”
- For the tax cuts debate: any stories that include the word “tax.”
- For the Social Security debate: any stories that include the words “Social Security.”
- For the Stimulus debate: any stories that include the word “stimulus.”
- For the executive pay debate: any stories that include the words: “executive pay,” “executive compensation,” or “bonuses.”

I. Tests of the Media Models and Accompanying Hypotheses

The following hypotheses flow from each of the four media models that were described in detail throughout Chapter 1. I establish a variety of hypotheses for testing media content across the six public policy debates. For a model to be validated, it must accurately predict coverage across more than 70 percent of all individual tests of media content that are derived from the hypotheses below. The 70 percent threshold was chosen based on absolute considerations. If a model accurately predicts coverage across 70 percent of all tests, that means it is effective more than two-thirds of the time, and nearly 75 percent of the time. Statistical models that account for 70 percent of the variance in any dependent variable are generally considered incredibly powerful in studies throughout political science. Seventy percent success in predicting media coverage (from any one of the four models in question) similarly translates into impressive explanatory and predictive power.

The various hypotheses included in this dissertation are included immediately below.

1. Hegemony

If there is a significant pro-business bias to reporting, this should be discernable through content analysis. When examining news commentary, the following predictions should be validated:

H1: The editorials in newspapers, pundits in cable news, and a majority of op-ed writers in the New York Times and Chicago Sun Times favor Republican positions over Democratic ones on the six policy debates in question.

For the frames appearing in news stories:

H2: The percent of news articles and television transcripts containing conservative and Republican frames for the six policy debates in question is greater than the percent supporting liberal and Democratic frames.

In regards to story sources, those appearing in stories are overwhelmingly Republican in orientation.

H3: The total percent of quoted sources in news stories for the six policy debates favor Republicans and their conservative messages over Democrats and their liberal messages.

H4: The total percent of Republican leaders mentioned in news articles' headlines, lead paragraphs, and throughout entire stories is greater than the percent of Democratic leaders that appear. (Note, a lead paragraph is defined as including the first five sentences of each story).

2. Liberal Media

Contrary to the hegemonic approach, a majority of media op-eds, editorials, and stories in television outlets and newspapers are expected to support the minimum wage, based upon social justice considerations. If the liberal media model is an effective predictor of coverage, the following hypotheses should be validated:

H5: The editorials in newspapers, pundits in cable news, and a majority of op-ed writers in the New York Times and Chicago Sun Times favor Democratic positions over Republican ones across the six policy debates in question.

Concerning frames included in reporting:

H6: The percent of news stories containing liberal and Democratic frames for the six policy debates is greater than the percent containing conservative-Republican frames.

In regards to reporting, the partisan sources appearing in stories should favor pro-business sources:

H7: The total percent of quoted sources in news articles and television transcripts for the six policy debates favors Democratic over Republican leaders.

H8: The total percent of Democrats appearing in news articles' headlines, in lead paragraphs, and throughout entire stories is greater than the percent of Republicans that appear.

3. Indexing

If media reporting is indexed to official views on policy issues, this should be discernible in media coverage. The indexing model can be verified by Democratic sources dominating during periods of unified Democratic control of government, by Republican sources dominating during unified Republican control of government, and with a less consistent pattern of partisan dominance evident during divided control of government.

If the indexing model is accurate, the following hypotheses should be verified:

H 9: The range of commentary expressed by the editorial staff for newspapers, pundits in cable news, and op-ed writers in the New York Times and Chicago Sun Times falls within the bi-partisan spectrum of opinion expressed among Democrats and Republicans in Washington. Neither pro-Republican nor pro-Democratic positions dominate editorials and op-ed commentary, since the numerous media outlets examined contain a variety of views that are situated within different segments of the bi-partisan political spectrum. (Note: for a more specific set of findings, see the qualitative results accompanying discussions of this hypothesis that appear throughout Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

For news frames appearing in stories:

H10: The percent of stories containing Democratic and Republican frames is approximately equal across all six policy issues, since journalists make a conscious effort to include “both sides” of stories in their reporting.

In regards to reporting, the sources appearing in stories should vary depending on the composition of the partisan regime holding governmental power:

H11: The total percent of quoted sources in news stories for the six policy issues favors Democrats during unified Democratic government, favors Republicans during Republican unified government, and favors neither party during divided party government.

H12: The total percent of Democrats appearing in news articles' headlines, lead paragraphs, and throughout entire stories is greater during unified Democratic government, greater for Republicans during unified Republican government, and dominant for neither party during divided party government.

4. Pluralism

If media reporting is pluralistic in approach, this should be clearly evident through content analysis of media reports, and in op-eds.

H13: Non-state actors account for at least one-third (33 percent) of all op-ed writers appearing in the New York Times, Chicago Sun Times for the policy issues analyzed, while state actors account for no more than two-thirds (66 percent) of all writers.

For clarity purposes, non-state actors include the following categories: academics, business leaders, labor leaders, and general citizens.

Concerning reporting itself, media should serve as a public forum for competing interests battling out the benefits and drawbacks of policies such as the minimum wage.

H14: The breakdown of quoted sources in news stories is comprised of at least one-third (33 percent) non-state actors (business and labor reps, academics/experts, think tank reps, "people on the street"), compared to no more than 66 percent state actors (government officials, government specialists/bureaucrats, etc.)

H15: Headlines and lead paragraphs for news articles reference non-state actors at least one third (33 percent) of the time, and state actors no more than 66 percent of the time.

The 33 percent threshold for the pluralist model does *not* translate into overwhelming dominance for non-state actors. However, many scholars will likely suggest that expecting non-state sources to constitute half or more of all sources appearing in story headlines, leads, and as quoted sources is quite unrealistic. Journalistic norms encourage the centralization of information production, as seen in news

beats that are centered on Capitol Hill and the Executive branch. In light of this privileged (if not dominant position) for government officials, it would be unwise to expect non-state actors to constitute a majority of all sources and subjects in stories. A 33 percent threshold, however, translates into a quite significant presence for non-state actors, and would represent evidence of a fairly strong pluralistic aspect to news reporting.

J. Thresholds for Assessing the Prominence of Pro and Anti Arguments

The hypotheses above test all the models in question through the use of various quantitative thresholds. Media coverage will be considered “liberal” in orientation if it satisfies a number of requirements for each of the six policy debates. For the liberal model to be validated, the percent of liberal/Democratic frames is more than ten percent larger than the percent of Republican frames (for example, of all the frames that appear for one issue, more than 60 percent will need to be Democratic, with less than 40 percent Republican). Similarly, the percent of Democrats appearing in story headlines, leads, and quoted sources must be more than ten percent larger than the percent of Republicans that appear. The same threshold is employed for assessing hegemonic arguments, except that Republican frames are expected to dominate over Democratic ones. The indexing model will be validated if frames that are Democratic and Republican occur in *approximately equal* numbers, and if Democratic and Republican sources are approximately equal in headlines, lead paragraphs, throughout stories, and in quoted sources (meaning that Democratic claims or Republicans cannot individually account for more than 60 percent of all frames, or actors appearing in headlines, leads, throughout stories and in quoted sources).

Why 60 percent threshold? As an absolute number, 60 percent is just 10 percent higher than a 50 percent threshold, which could easily be reached by chance in any analysis of sources appearing in headlines, story leads, quoted sources, or with regard to competing ideological frames. The 60 percent

threshold is more appropriate when reflecting on dominant sources and frames *relative to* less frequently appearing actors and frames. Breaking the 60 percent threshold means that the dominant party and ideological frames appear *20 percentage points* more often than the less dominant party and ideological frames, which appear less than 40 percent of the time. Twenty percentage point dominance translates into a serious advantage for one party and their ideology, compared to the competing party and its ideological positions.

K. Content Analysis: Supplemental Coders and Inter-Coder Reliability

Table II explores in length the process undertaken under my content analysis of media coverage of public policy disputes. In undertaking my content analyses, I relied on four supplemental coders to assess the reliability of my findings. Coders examined an average of between 10 to 30 percent of all stories I examined for policy debates, depending on the specific issue in question. Stories examined by supplemental coders were randomly drawn from the entire list of stories in which I analyzed. Issues that included a smaller number of stories often required supplemental coders to analyze a greater number of stories (often as much as one-third of all stories, so as to gather enough observations for an effective reliability test), whereas issues with a larger number of stories required supplemental coders to examine a smaller percentage of stories (as little as 10 percent). For chapters 2 through 5 (analyzing the liberal, hegemonic, indexing, and pluralist models), two supplemental coders examined stories for three of the six policy debates, while the other two supplemental coders examined stories for the other three of six debates. These reliability measures accompany the specific tests described in individual chapter sections. Following a simple inter-coder reliability test established by Neundorf, coder-reliability levels were very high, due to the detailed instructions established in my codebook and the simple analyses undertaken throughout this dissertation.¹⁰ Analyses of actors appearing in headlines, story leads, throughout stories, and in quoted sources are straightforward measures of media content.

TABLE II

STEPS IN CONTENT ANALYSIS (QUESTIONS POSED FOR EACH STORY)	
For Newspaper Stories	
Story Title	Each Type of Actors Referenced? Yes/No
Story Lead (First 5 Sentences of Story)	Each Type of Actors Referenced? Yes/No
Quoted Sources Within Stories	Each Type of Actors Quoted? Yes/No How Many Times?
Ideological Frames Within Stories	Each Individual Frame Referenced? Yes/No
Party & Leader Mentions	Specific Individuals and Party Names Referenced? Yes/No How Many Times?
For CBS Broadcast Stories	
Story Title	Each Type of Actors Referenced? Yes/No
Ideological Frames Within Stories	Each Individual Frame Referenced? Yes/No
Party & Leader Mentions	Specific Individuals and Party Names Referenced? Yes/No How Many Times?
For Cable News Stories	
Story Lead (First 5 Sentences After a Policy Topic is First Mentioned in a Transcript)	Each Type of Actors Referenced? Yes/No
Ideological Frames Within Stories	Each Individual Frame Referenced Within 50 Words of Each Time the Policy Topic is Referenced? Yes/No
Party & Party Leader Mentions	Specific Individuals and Party Names Referenced? Yes/No How Many Times?
For Op-Eds & Editorials	
Slant of Editorial/Op-Ed	Supportive/Opposed to Policy Proposal in Question? Yes/No

Coders for stories cycled through a battery of questions related to which sources appeared in stories, how often they appeared, and with regard to whether specific arguments (frames) appeared in stories. Depending on the specific test, inter-coder reliability levels ranged from a low of 80 percent to a high of 100 percent. Reliability levels reached more than 90 percent for the vast majority, or 125 out of 129, of the tests undertaken. In only a handful of tests (4 of 129) were inter-coder reliability levels between 80 to 89 percent.

L. Implications of the Media Models for Reporting

Normative questions about media's proper role in the reporting of political issues are a common part of public discourse. Scholars criticize mass media in the United States for reporting major stories in a propagandistic fashion, in favor of the perspectives of political and economic elites.¹¹ Even those who frame the American media as "semi-independent" in its reporting from government highlight journalists' heavy reliance on official sources as a problem for democracy.¹² Medias' reporting on, and framing of economic policy issues are of major social importance. Media outlets that heavily emphasize Republican over Democratic views (or vice versa) fail to serve as broad forums for the expression of a wide diversity of views. In contrast, media outlets that report political officials' views, while also allotting significant space for other actors such as union members, business officials, and other types of experts and pundits, provide a more expansive forum for the expression of many different views. If journalists are overly-reliant on criticisms of government (especially against Republican and conservative points of view), such a pattern of coverage may carry with it negative implications for officials seeking to exercise effective governing powers. If debates in the mass media are dominated by political officials, non-state actors will be consistently neglected.

Whether one feels that media should simply report the views of political leaders, or serve a wider constituency of non-official actors as well, is a matter open to normative dispute and discussion.

However, democratic theories of governance often stress the desirability of political deliberation amongst a large number of sources and viewpoints, which pluralistically compete in the public policy arena. The extent to which these sources receive a hearing in mass media is a question of major relevance in any discussion of political communication and democratic theory. Whether media biases are also accompanied by significant media effects on public policy attitudes is also an important question worth exploring in its own right.

Notes

¹ Pew Research Center, "Economy, Jobs Trump All Other Policy Priorities in 2009," 22 January 2009, [://people-press.org/report/485/economy-top-policy-priority](http://people-press.org/report/485/economy-top-policy-priority); Pew Research Center, "Public's Priorities for 2010: Economy, Jobs, Terrorism," 25 January 2010, <http://people-press.org/report/584/policy-priorities-2010>; Pew Research Center, "Bush Failing in Social Security Push," 2 March 2005, <http://people-press.org/report/238/bush-failing-in-social-security-push>; Pew Research Center, "Public Approval on Par, No Tax Cut Momentum," 22 February 2001, <http://people-press.org/report/17/bush-approval-on-par-no-tax-cut-momentum>; Pew Research Center, "Strong Support for Minimum Wage Hike and Preserving Entitlements," 17 February 1995, <http://people-press.org/report/19950217/strong-support-for-minimum-wage-hike-and-preserving-entitlements>

² Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Longman, 2003); James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, *Agenda Setting* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

³ David Enrich, Michael R. Crittenden, and Maurice Tamman, "Bank Lending Keeps Dropping," *Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124019360346233883.html>

⁴ Dearing and Rogers, 1996; McvCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 2004.

⁵ State of the News Media 2009, "Network Audiences," *Project for Excellence in Journalism*, 2009, http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/narrative_networktv_audience.php?cat=2&media=6

⁶ State of the News Media 2009, "Cable Audiences," *Project for Excellence in Journalism*, 2009, http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/narrative_cabletv_audience.php?cat=1

⁷ W. Russell Neuman, Mario R. Just, and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 92.

⁸ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the News Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002); Jonathan Mermin, *Covering War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Princeton: Princeton, 1999); W. Lance Bennett, Steven Livingston, and Regina Lawrence, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007); Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

⁹ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007); Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Longman, 2010); Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Following Neuendorf, I undertook simple calculations of inter-coder reliability, by counting the number of correct coding classifications for story headlines, leads, number of quoted sources, and frames, and dividing the total number of correct coding classifications by the total possible coding classifications. For more on Neuendorf's discussion of calculating inter-coder reliability, see: Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 2001).

¹¹ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 2002.

¹² Bennett, et. al., 2007.

IV. THE CASE OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: THE MINIMUM WAGE, 1996-2007

Dick Arney, economist and former Republican House Majority Leader

- "This Congress will not enact legislation that will kill jobs."¹ February 17, 1995

Robert Reich, Public Policy Professor and former Clinton Secretary of Labor

- "Eleven million workers earn less than \$5.15 an hour, yet some Republicans still claim that they don't need a raise."² February 17, 1995

The above quotes from Robert Reich and Dick Arney symbolize the strong divide that exists between Democrats and Republicans with regard to the minimum wage. Republicans have long opposed increases in the minimum wage, especially when such legislation is passed without accompanying business tax cuts that are aimed at helping offset the costs to employers of a higher wage. Opposition was most strongly evident in Arney's statement, as he promised (as Republican House Majority Leader) to "resist an increase in the minimum wage with every fiber of my being" during the 1996 Congressional wage debate. Democrats, conversely, frame wage increases as a fundamental question of fairness and as an effective means of fighting poverty and rewarding poorer Americans' hard work against inflationary pressures that contribute to the deterioration of workers' wages and purchasing power. Agreeing with Reich's comments above, former Clinton Spokesman Mike McCurry announced during the 1996 debate that raising the minimum wage "fits with a consistent theme that this President has articulated: that working families and those who work hard for a living need to get a break. The value of the minimum wage...has eroded over time and as a matter of fairness that needs to be addressed."³

The arguments raised by Republican and Democratic officials set the foundation for national minimum wage debates in 1996, and in 2007 when the issue was revisited by national political leaders.

Competing partisan claims are systematically examined throughout this chapter in relation to the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage bills. I assess four competing models for explaining public policy debates in order to determine which best explains the coverage in question. The indexing model predicts that the political actors appearing in story headlines, leads, partisan mentions, and sources quoted throughout stories are split roughly evenly between Democratic and Republican officials, considering that control of government in 1996 and 2007 was split between both parties. The indexing model also predicts that the frames appearing in stories are equally split between the arguments voiced by members of both parties. In contrast, the liberal and hegemonic models expect that headlines, leads, partisan mentions, quoted sources, and policy frames that appear in stories are dominated by Democratic and Republican actors respectively. Finally, a pluralistic model predicts that non-state actors appear in at least one-third of stories, and comprise at least one-third of all actors mentioned in headlines, leads, and quoted sources.

A. Competing Policy Perspectives Examined

Supporters of the minimum wage point to a variety of empirical indicators, which they argue justify government mandated increases in workers' pay. Raising the minimum wage is supported in the name of redistributing resources from the wealthy to the working poor, and as necessary in fulfilling this goal in a time of growing inequality.⁴ The minimum wage is demonstrated to "redistribute" resources by requiring employers generally, and small businesses and large corporations more specifically, to increase the amount that they pay low-income workers.⁵ Available evidence suggests that, in the year following increases, individual states that raised their minimum wage saw the median income for food service workers increase by one-sixth of a percent overall, in contrast to a nearly one percent decrease in the value of wages in non-minimum wage raising states, after adjusting for inflation. Data gathered from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on median service workers' earnings and employment levels (state-by-state) in the food service industry suggest that the minimum wage may produce positive benefits for

workers. My examination of states that increased the minimum wage from 2001 through 2005 found that the total difference in change in food service workers' median wage was 1.5 percent between states that did and did not raise their minimum wages. These effects were not accompanied by any statistically significant decrease in employment.⁶ Increases in income among food service workers, however, are highly statistically significant, suggesting that there is a redistributive effect of the minimum wage from business owners to lower wage employees. Other studies find similar effects for the minimum wage. The 1996-1997 federal increase, for example, was estimated to have affected an estimated 9.9 million workers, or 8.9% of the workforce in terms of increasing their pay.⁷ The 2007 minimum wage was similarly estimated to affect nearly 15 million workers.⁸ The effects of wage increases in increasing workers' incomes are the main defense employed by supporters when they speak of the need to raise the minimum wage.

The minimum wage appears to significantly redistribute resources directly from owners to employees, but critics also argue that it also has the indirect consequence of increasing the poverty, unemployment, and ultimately the desperation of low-income workers. These critics contend that the minimum wage inadvertently fails in its goal of redistributing wealth from corporate owners to workers. While conceding that increases in the minimum wage increase low income workers' pay, David Neumark finds that it is also associated with increased unemployment.⁹ According to minimum wage opponents, as pay increases are mandated by government, employers either lay off a larger number of workers or fail to hire new ones at as fast a rate as they would have in order to offset the costs of the minimum wage increase. Neumark's findings are echoed by a large number of economists, and across many countries, including the U.S., Indonesia, Colombia, and Mexico.¹⁰ Many economists describe the market as influenced by the "elasticity" of demand for labor – with the "average estimate" of a 10 percent increase in the minimum wage causing a five percent drop in employment.¹¹ Economists also maintain that increases in the minimum wage are followed by an increase in price for products, as affected

businesses offset the cost of wage increases by increasing the costs of goods. This phenomenon, associated with the Phillips curve (which ties increased wages to increased good prices), implicates the minimum wage in growing inflation.¹²

Republicans in Washington regularly cite studies critical of the minimum wage when opposing Democratic minimum wage legislation. The claims made by critics, however, are not unchallenged. An increasing number of studies question the alleged harmful effects of the minimum wage on workers and businesses. The commonly cited study by economists David Card and Alan Krueger, *Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage*, finds no negative employment effects in the fast food industry for states that raised the minimum wage (when compared to neighboring states that did not raise their wage). Subsequent studies reinforced Card and Krueger's findings, concluding that no loss of employment (or nearly non-existent losses) accompanies increases in the minimum wage.¹³ Scholars also challenge the claim that state increases in the minimum wage hurt small businesses and profits, and question claims that the minimum wage is counterproductive in reducing poverty due to its disproportionate effects on young, part-time workers (as compared to adult, full-time ones). Numerous studies find no statistically significant correlation between minimum wage increases and increases in business failures in states that raise wages.¹⁴ Analysis also indicates that workers affected by the minimum wage are primarily adults who work full time serving as a primary income sources for their families, not teenagers seeking supplemental part-time income.¹⁵ On the other hand, many economists continue to produce studies that provide empirical evidence suggesting that the minimum wage increases unemployment.¹⁶ Democrats typically ignore or discount critical studies, and embrace those studies suggesting there is no link between raising the minimum wage and increasing unemployment. Conversely, Republicans tend to embrace studies suggesting the minimum wage has a negative impact on workers, while ignoring or downplaying studies suggesting no relationship between raising wages and unemployment.

The above data suggest that there is much disagreement regarding the supposed effects of the minimum wage. In short, the issue is fairly complex, especially to lay audiences and non-experts, in terms of the minimum wage's perceived effects and with regard to the alleged methodological advantages and weaknesses of competing studies. Ambiguity regarding the effects of the minimum wage is evident in the scholarly community more generally. One 2000 survey of hundreds of members of the American Economic Association (AEA), for example, found that 46 percent agreed that "minimum wages increase unemployment among young and unskilled workers," whereas 27 percent did not agree.¹⁷ A 2006 survey found that nearly 38 percent of AEA members supported increasing the minimum wage; 14 percent preferred to keep it at the 2006 level, and 47 percent preferred to eliminate the minimum wage entirely.¹⁸ In other words, economists seem split between those who favor the minimum wage's abolition on the one hand, or its maintenance or strengthening on the other. In light of such strong disagreement, it may be unrealistic to expect non-experts to come to authoritative conclusions with regard to the possible positive or negative effects of the minimum wage.

The issue of the minimum wage strongly divides the Democratic and Republican parties, and the campaign contributions from organized interests (labor and business) have even been positively and negatively correlated to individual legislators' voting records in favor of, or opposed to the minimum wage.¹⁹ Continued political conflict over the minimum wage today reinforces the policy issue's relevance as related to larger issues of government regulation of business. But the minimum wage constitutes more than just a subject of political debate for political leaders. Benjamin Page and James Simmons argue that increases in the minimum wage represent one of many ways in which the government can fight social inequality.²⁰ Traditional econometric assumptions, conversely, posit that the minimum wage is an artificial distortion of "free markets" and that it produces – as mentioned earlier – higher levels of unemployment amongst low wage workers and higher inflation. Other studies either fail to find negative employment effects, or find varied negative effects on employment

depending on the demographic groups in question.²¹ However one assesses the impact of the minimum wage, it remains an important area of policy dispute. The main contours of the debate, as described above, are examined at length in my content analysis of media coverage of the minimum wage.

Media coverage of the minimum wage is also of major concern considering the importance of the press in promoting deliberation on major economic issues. Media outlets serve a major function in American politics, serving as a forum for the discussion of the possible benefits or drawbacks of proposed policies. Political leaders rely on, and utilize media outlets in order to communicate the promised benefits of their policy proposals to the general public, typically to those who are the most politically interested, but often times attempting to reach the mass public as well. The minimum wage is one such policy that has the potential to reach large segments of the public, and inform them about the effects on the earnings of low-income individuals and families. Whether political leaders are able to garner public support for, or opposition to the minimum wage from interested audiences (such as members of labor unions, regular media consumers, or business leaders) may also depend greatly on media deliberation. Understanding precisely how media communicate messages related to the minimum wage remains a major concern for political officials. Scholarly studies of media have often neglected coverage of economic issues in the past. The minimum wage itself receives very little scholarly attention.²²

B. **The Political Debate, 1996-2007**

The 1996 and 2007 minimum wage debates were marked by intense partisan conflict. Story headlines reported throughout news outlets examined here conveyed the gravity of the dispute. Some examples from my content analysis include: “Republicans Seeking to Counter Democrats over the Minimum Wage” (*New York Times*), “House Leaders Say They’ll Block Minimum Wage Increase; Suggest Tax Breaks for Business and Working Families Instead” (*CBS*), “Democrats Refuse to Consider Gas Tax

Repeal Without Vote on Minimum Wage Hike” (CBS), “White House Rips Bid to Cut Gas Tax” (*Sun Times*), and “GOP Blocks House Push for Minimum Wage Vote” (*Sun Times*). Similar fighting was evident in 2007, as the following sample of headlines suggests: “Effort to Move on Minimum Wage Bill in Senate Falters” (*NYT*), “[Republican] Tax Measure Could be a Stumbling Block for Minimum Wage Legislation” (*NYT*), “Republicans Decry Politics of Democratic Legislation” (*Fox News*), and “Senate Debates Proposed Minimum Wage Increase” (CBS). These headlines suggest that agreement on raising the minimum wage was far from apparent during these debates.

The conflict over the 1996 proposed minimum wage increase took place at a time when the inflation-adjusted value of the wage had reached a 40-year low.²³ Former Democratic President Bill Clinton pushed for a series of increases in the minimum wage, despite the Democrat’s lack of majority control of Congress. In light of divided partisan control of Congress and the executive branch, reports spoke of an ongoing “gridlock” which eventually culminated with the shutdown of the federal government (numerous times) over budgetary conflicts between Democrats and Republicans.²⁴ Disputes over a minimum wage raise produced strongly antagonistic rhetoric from both parties. Efforts by Democratic Senators such as Tom Daschle and Edward Kennedy to force a vote on the minimum wage were met with resistance by then-Republican Presidential candidate Bob Dole, among other Republicans, who were seeking to block a final vote by including numerous add-on bills to a minimum wage vote that complicated a simple “yes-no” vote on the initiative. Indicating an interest in some form of compromise, Clinton offered to sign a bill including both the Democrats’ favored minimum wage increase and Republican-supported tax cuts for businesses and consumers. Clinton’s role as a mediator between the parties only went so far, however, as he denounced Republican proposed add-on legislation allowing employers to avoid cooperating with union leaders in relation to basic workplace activities. Clinton denounced this bill, known as the “Team Act,” as a “poison pill” aimed at “undermining workers’ rights,” and his (along with other Democratic) opposition ensured that the

legislation would not be seriously considered along with any discussion of business tax cuts and a minimum wage increase.²⁵

Partisan battles in Washington continued throughout the first half of 1996 as the debate the minimum wage extended over a period of months, and amidst regular media coverage. Eventually, Congressional Republicans and Democrats came to a compromise that included both tax cuts and minimum wage increases to be instated over a two year period. The resulting bill, titled “The Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996,” was signed into law on August 20, 1996, after a reconciliation process between both the House of Representatives and Senate in order to iron-out differences between competing versions of the bill. The bill included, among other tax cuts, “relief for small businesses,” intended to offset the costs of an increase in the minimum wage. The bill also included two increases in the minimum wage, raising it from the previous \$4.25 an hour nationally to \$4.75 an hour by October 1, 1996, and to \$5.15 an hour by September 1, 1997. Although political debate over the minimum wage was characterized by fierce conflict, both parties were eventually able to reach a compromise that promised benefits to Democrats’ labor constituency and Republican-supported business interests.

C. Minimum Wage Redux: The 2007 Debate

The 2007 conflict over the minimum wage was similar in many respects to the debate seen in 1996. 2007 again saw a conflict materialize between Democrats who supported an increase, and Republicans warning that such an action would hurt workers and businesses. After narrowly capturing majority control in the House and Senate following the 2006 midterm elections, Democrats moved forward with a “100 Hour Plan,” introduced in early January, that proposed legislation covering the minimum wage, lobbying rules in Washington, deficit reduction, student loans, and prescription drug

prices, among other reforms. The debate over the minimum wage, this time, was far shorter. It took place over a matter of weeks, rather than in months, as seen in the 1996 debate.

Support for, and opposition to the minimum wage was voiced along the contours of debate discussed above. While rhetorically opposing the minimum wage, Republicans demanded passage of business tax cuts to offset the cost of a higher wage as part of any compromise package. Republican partisan opposition this time around was less fierce than that seen in 1996. Whereas only twenty House Republicans, or just eight percent of all House Republicans, vowed to support a minimum wage increase in 1996, approximately 40 percent of House Republicans supported a minimum wage bill without of tax cuts in 2007.²⁶ Such “support” from Republicans, however, was over-stated. As in 1996, Senate Republicans refused to pass a minimum wage bill without simultaneously granting billions in tax cuts to business interests, despite Democrats’ calls for a “clean bill” containing only a wage increase.²⁷ Former President George W. Bush similarly insisted that tax cuts be included in any minimum wage bill.²⁸ As with partisan conflict in 1996, the 2007 fight over the minimum wage endured until mid-2007, when Democrats attached the minimum wage increase (accompanied by business tax cuts), to a supplemental war funding bill. The final bill, titled “The U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans’ Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, 2007,” was passed on May 25, 2007, and addressed a variety of disparate issues. Similar to 1996 legislation, the 2007 bill increased the minimum wage in increments, from \$5.15 to \$5.85 an hour by July, 2007, to \$6.55 an hour by July, 2008, and to \$7.25 an hour by July, 2009. As in 1996, the wage increase was also accompanied by billion in business tax cuts.

In short, the 2007 minimum wage debate was remarkably similar to the 1996 debate in terms of the ideological parameters of the debate, with regard to the substance of legislation that was passed, and in terms of the ways that both debates lingered over a number of months until finally passing. No two legislative debates are exactly the same, however. In the case of the 2007 debate, President Bush played a far less antagonistic role (rhetorically at least), when compared to Bob Dole did in 1996. Bush

announced qualified support for raising the minimum wage, *if* the increase was accompanied by business tax cuts. Furthermore, Bush was largely focused on other issues in early 2007, including Social Security reform at the domestic level, and opposition to Democrats' calls for Iraq withdrawal at the international level. In light of Bush's abdication on the minimum wage, in addition to the relatively weaker Republican opposition (in the House amid still strong Republican opposition), and the rapid nature of the Democrats' "100 Hour" initiative, one might expect to see some differences in media coverage when comparing the 1996 and 2007 cases.

D. Competing Frames Take Center Stage

In assessing the nature of the public debates taking place, I measured the three most common frames appearing among supporters and opponents of the minimum wage. These frames were drawn from the arguments discussed above, expressed by experts in the study of political economy and by prominent political leaders. These frames were also determined by an extensive preliminary reading of the stories covering the minimum wage in both periods, as seen in the news outlets I examine throughout this dissertation.

A close reading of news stories and scholarly studies covering the minimum wage provides one with a basic understanding of the claims and counter-claims at hand. With regard to those who oppose the minimum wage, the main frames include: 1. The "Unemployment Effects" frame, which contends that increasing the minimum wage causes a corresponding loss in employment among low-pay workers; 2. The "Tax Cuts" frame, which is dominated by discussions of business taxes and the need to cut such taxes within stories covering the minimum wage; and 3. The "Labor Pandering" frame, which includes any derogatory references to Democrats as under the control or influence of worker and union interests. For those who support the minimum wage, the major frames I analyzed include: 1. The "No Unemployment Effects" frame, which is characterized by challenges to the notion that minimum wage

increases cause higher unemployment; 2. The “Common Man” frame, which is defined by any references to families in need, workers, and the persistence of poverty appearing in stories; and 3. The “Stagnation-Inflation” frame, which entails references to workers’ stagnating wages or to their declining value due to inflation. These frames were chosen because they fit comfortably within the debates undertaken by supporters and opponents of the minimum wage, and related strongly back to the points in which officials and experts choose to raise and ignore when discussing worker pay.

E. Empirical Findings

The data within this chapter provide comprehensive findings for competing liberal, hegemonic, pluralistic, and indexing models. I analyze the results from print media first, and then review the television findings, starting with the 1996 minimum wage debate and ending with the 2007 debate. Table III provides the results for print coverage of major actors in story headlines, leads, and for sources quoted in the 1996 minimum wage discussion in both the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. Analyzing the data, one sees little evidence for pluralist predictions, with non-state actors failing to account for at least one-third of all actors across headlines, leads, and quoted sources in stories for both newspapers. Only the *Chicago Sun Times* comes close to including non-state actors as 33 percent of all quoted sources, although it falls short by one percentage point.

TABLE III

MINIMUM WAGE (1996) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ²⁹							
Actors	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)		Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)	
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	19	10	29	56	59	54	48
Republicans	17	5	24	50	49	44	52
Business Leaders	0	0	1	4	3	6	12
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	7	5	7	6
Workers and Unionists	0	0	0	0	8	4	4
Academics	0	0	0	2	5	6	6
Bureaucrats	0	0	1	0	5	0	3
Citizens	0	0	0	2	3	1	4
Executive	30	15	19	67	54	31	22
Legislative	13	4	49	50	54	45	43
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Relatively speaking, reporting on the minimum wage focused more heavily on non-state actors in 1996 than it did in 2007. The long period of political debate over the minimum wage, taking place across early to mid-1996, included a somewhat sustained emphasis on business leaders, labor leaders, workers, and general citizens. A variety of business interests, large and small, were consulted by reporters.

Some examples of sources cited included the National Federation of Independent businesses, small business lobbyists, and business owners from the service sector in the areas of fast-food, retail, and supermarkets, which are heavily defined by low-wage jobs.³⁰ Reporting on labor leaders, workers, and union members included discussion of major national unions (and their members), with journalists

citing organizations such as the *AFL-CIO* and the *Service Employees International Union (SEIU)* and their representatives, such as John Sweeney (*AFL-CIO*) and Andy Stern (*SEIU*), in addition to “average” workers in the service industry.³¹ Finally, economists who specialize in the study of public policy and political economy were also somewhat regularly consulted. These individuals are discussed in greater detail in my analysis of media framing below.

Little evidence exists in support of the liberal and hegemonic models. Table III demonstrates that Democratic and Republican voices fail to dominate headlines, leads, and quoted sources in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, or *CBS*, as the liberal and hegemonic hypotheses predict. Either Democratic or Republican actors need to appear in headlines, story leads, or as quoted sources more than 20 percentage points as often, when compared to appearances for members of the competing party, for the liberal or hegemonic models to be verified. Neither party is able to achieve this feat in *any* category analyzed in 1996.

In contrast, the indexing model is verified in every category analyzed in Table III. Indexing predicts that Democratic and Republican actors both failed to dominate headlines, leads, or quoted sources across media outlets during the 1996 minimum wage debate – during a time of divided national government. This prediction is validated in light of the data examined here. The indexing model is also confirmed after examining state and non-state actors. State actors, including representatives from the executive branch, congress, and the national bureaucracy dominate coverage across all three outlets when examining story headlines, leads, and quoted sources. As the indexing model predicts, non-state actors constitute less than one-third of actors across all categories examined, leaving state actors to dominate reporting. Non-state actors, however, appear far more often in 1996 stories on the minimum wage, relative to the 2007 stories, as seen in Table IV. This finding suggests that reporters technically could have chosen to cite non-state actors with even greater or lesser frequency in 1996 (and even in 2007) if they had chosen to do so.

No single party is privileged in the 1996 coverage. Furthermore, neither the legislative branch nor the executive control the discourse over the minimum wage. As Table III finds, legislative voices dominated coverage in three of the seven categories for story headlines, leads, and quoted sources; executive sources also receive more attention in three of the seven categories. Finally, neither the executive nor the legislative branch is privileged in the last of seven categories, with both branches being evenly quoted in the case of *Chicago Sun Times* story leads. In short, both congress and the presidency were extraordinarily effective in garnering attention from journalists. This trend stands in sharp contrast to minimum wage reporting in 2007, as legislative voices benefitted from greater attention in reporting across six of the seven categories seen in Table IV.

Reporting in 2007 was defined by an approximately even balance between partisan actors. Most prominent among Democrats were President Bill Clinton, Labor Secretary Robert Reich, and long-time progressive Senator and labor supporter Edward Kennedy, among other members of the executive and congress. Dominant Republican officials who received coverage throughout news outlets that I examined included, most prominently Bob Dole, who played an instrumental role in the Congressional debate, not only as the Republican presidential candidate but also as the Senate Majority Leader. Other Republicans commonly discussed and quoted included House Majority Leader Dick Armey and Senate Majority Whip Trent Lott, among other major Republican leaders in Congress. The Republican and Democratic leaders above, by virtue of their high-level institutional positions in congress and the executive, were effective in leading their respective sides of the partisan debate in reporting on the minimum wage.

Findings for the major actors covered in the 2007 minimum wage debate are similar to those found in 1996, albeit less consistently in support of the indexing model. At a time when government was again divided – this time between a Republican president and a Democratic congress – the debate over raising the minimum wage leaned somewhat toward the Democrats. The privileging of Democrats,

however, was not enough so as to invalidate the predictions of the indexing model or to verify the predictions of the liberal, hegemonic, or pluralist models.

Table IV provides evidence of a Democratic advantage in reporting across the board, although this pattern falls short of confirming the liberal media model. Nine categories are analyzed for story headlines, leads, and quoted sources, across five media outlets; however, two of those categories (headlines from the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*) are excluded since there were not enough actors coded to run effective tests. References to specific actors were few and far between in these cases in light of the relatively smaller number of stories involved in the 2007 minimum wage debate. With regard to the other seven categories, three of the seven reveal evidence of liberal dominance – meaning that Democratic sources outnumbered Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points. On the other hand, four of the seven categories confirm the indexing predictions, with Democratic and Republican sources failing to dominate by more than 20 percentage points. Even stronger evidence confirming the indexing model is seen when examining state and non-state actors. In this case, non-state actors fail to comprise at least 33 percent of all sources across all of the seven categories analyzed, leaving state actors to dominate in every case.

Tests of competing models find most of them lacking in explanatory power. Neither the pluralist nor the hegemonic models are validated in a single one of the seven categories in Table IV. For the hegemonic model, Republican actors fail to outnumber Democratic ones in even one category. As described above with regard to the pluralist model, non-state actors do not reach the 33 percent threshold in any of the categories examined. The liberal media model *is* confirmed in three of the seven categories, with Democratic voices dominating Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points. Such prominence for liberal actors, however, will need to be verified across all of the other policy case studies for the liberal media model to remain theoretically relevant.

TABLE IV

MINIMUM WAGE (2007) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ³²									
	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)		Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)			
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	0	0	38	14	67	53	56	21	33
Republicans	0	0	0	7	33	33	6	23	17
Business Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	>1	0
Workers and Unionists	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Academics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0
Bureaucrats	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0
Citizens	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	>1	0
Executive	0	0	5	7	33	31	0	>1	11
Legislative	0	0	71	21	33	51	56	37	39
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Reporting on the minimum wage in 2007 is far less pluralistic than in 1996. Business leaders receive almost no coverage across news outlets and in story headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Such sources appear in only one category, as seen in sources quoted in the *New York Times*, where the paper consulted business representatives such as the National Restaurant Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and business representatives such as those from the food service industry.³³ Labor leaders and union workers similarly received meager-to-non-existent attention, while reporting of academics' voices was few and far between. Academic sources consulted were largely limited to economists specializing in the study of public policy and the minimum wage, although these voices were hardly able to compete with political officials in terms of the frequency of their appearance. Finally, "average" citizens occasionally appeared in stories, although they comprised a miniscule percent of all sources and actors referenced.

In sum, evidence for the media indexing is strongest among all the categories examined, with the model accurately predicting coverage in 11 of the 14 tests covering headlines (three tests), leads (four tests), quoted sources (two tests), and state and non-state actors (seven tests). The liberal media model places second, being validated in nearly half of the seven categories for which a test is available. Of major importance in the 2007 findings is the extensive privileging of government voices over non-state actors, although such privileging does lean toward the Democrats to a modest extent.

Although somewhat imbalanced along partisan lines, reporting on the 2007 minimum wage focused on both leaders of the Democratic and Republican Parties who sought to influence the terms of the Congressional debate. Commonly sourced Democratic actors included Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, among other major congressional leaders. Republicans regularly appearing in stories included President George W. Bush and House Minority Leader John Boehner, among other major committee and partisan leaders. Clearly, journalists were

looking to the most prestigious and senior-most members of Congress when writing stories on the minimum wage.

1. Framing the Minimum Wage

Assessing the frames that appear throughout the media outlets examined, one sees further confirmation of the indexing model over the liberal and hegemonic arguments. As Table V suggests, reporters consistently made efforts to consider and address both liberal and conservative partisan perspectives in nearly equal numbers of stories across the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and *CBS* in 1996.

TABLE V

MINIMUM WAGE (1996) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA³⁴			
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>
No Unemployment Effects	4	2	6
Common Man	30	32	32
Stagnation-Inflation	16	15	9
Con Frames			
Unemployment Effects	15	17	14
Labor Pandering	4	4	8
Taxes-Tax Cuts	31	29	31

Contrary to the liberal and hegemonic predictions, neither Democratic nor Republican frames (in aggregate) monopolized reporting. Neither liberal nor conservative frames appeared at least twenty percentage points more often than each other. In total, conservative frames accounted for 50 percent, 49 percent, and 47 percent of all frames that appeared in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and *CBS* respectively. Liberal frames comprised 50 percent, 50 percent, and 53 percent of all frames that appeared in these news outlets. These findings are precisely what the indexing model predicts in light of the divided nature of government during the 1996 minimum wage debate. Journalistic norms require reporters to consult “both sides” of the partisan debate over the minimum wage, considering liberal and conservative points of view. This is precisely what happened in reporting on the minimum wage.

A closer examination of the frames examined here suggests that reporters engaged in consistent efforts to consult both supporters and opponents of the minimum wage increase. Political officials such as Republican Senator and Presidential candidate Bob Dole, and Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich argued back in forth over whether minimum wage increases produced higher levels of unemployment. Economists also engaged in this debate, presenting their own evidence that cut in both directions.³⁵ While the *New York Times* reported on “an inconclusive statistical battle over whether the move [raising the minimum wage] will hurt more workers than it helps,”³⁶ this statement was belied by the finding that the media outlets examined in 1996 (depending on the specific outlet) reported claims that the minimum wage increased unemployment between two to 8.5 times more often than challenges to this claim. Such an imbalance did not translate into a privileging of conservative-Republican frames over Democratic ones, however, when taking into account the frequency of *all* frames on each side of the debate.

Reporting favored conservative claims about the minimum wage’s employment effects, but frames cut in the opposite direction when comparing conservative frames that attacked labor and those that embraced the “common man” frame. This latter frame appeared far more frequently than did

attacks on the Democrats for “pandering” to labor, as seen in Table V. As part of the “common man” frame, Democrats preferred to focus their attention on American families and workers in need of higher pay, and on the attempts to reduce poverty by increasing the minimum wage. Reporting that fit within this frame was evident in stories with headlines such as: “Increase in Minimum Wage Could Help 190,000 in Illinois,” (*Chicago Sun Times*), and “Workers Raise Their Voices, Push for Minimum Wage Hike” (*Chicago Sun Times*), among others. Reporting within stories focused heavily on workers and working-class families. Democratic officials were quoted highlighting the troubles “working men and women are having [with] making ends meet,” and chastising Republicans for “lock[ing] out working families” by refusing to support a minimum wage increase.³⁷

Media framing did at times report Republican counter-attacks on American workers and labor organizing. Republican attacks on “labor bosses” appeared alongside attacks on the Democrats for allegedly falling hostage to unions such as the *AFL-CIO*, which the party relied on in its electoral efforts.³⁸ Republicans framed efforts to raise the minimum wage as “nothing but a political act of appeasement” of “big labor,” intended “to make the leaders of organized labor happy,” and warning that organized labor was embarking upon “probably the biggest overt power grab in history.”³⁹ Such attacks, however, were far less frequent than the “common man” frame, which appeared between four to eight times more often, depending on the media outlets examined.

A third debate visible in media framing pitted discussions of worker earnings and wage stagnation against discussions of tax cuts as a means of spurring economic growth and aiding businesses and consumers. Democrats participated in a systematic effort to emphasize the steady historical decline of American workers’ earnings, with the Clinton administration reminding news audiences that “the real value of the minimum wage” had moved “closer and closer to a 40-year low,”⁴⁰ while journalists consulted labor representatives who drew attention to “the stagnation of real wages,” which had been “frozen for many years” in light of the failure to raise the minimum wage.⁴¹ Conversely, Republicans’

discussion of earnings and pay focused more on taxes for business interests and consumers. Presidential candidate Bob Dole stressed that a gas tax cut was “the most certain way to give consumers relief,” while Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich prioritized “a combination of tax breaks for business and working families.”⁴² The conservative “tax cuts” frame was more common in reporting than the “earnings-stagnation” frame, with the former receiving between two to 3.5 times more coverage, depending on the outlets in question. This advantage for conservatives, again, was offset when aggregating the results from Table 3.3, as Republican and Democratic frames appeared in an approximately equal attention number of stories after looking reporting of all six conservative and liberal frames.

2. 2007 Minimum Wage Frames

Evidence from 2007 minimum wage reporting also supports the indexing model, although the results are less consistent than the 1996 case study. As the indexing model predicts, in three of the five outlets examined in Table VI, Republican and Democratic frames failed to dominate by more than twenty percentage points. In only one news organization, *MSNBC*, does coverage lean toward Democratic sources by more than 20 percentage points. Only one outlet, *CBS*, leans in a conservative direction, emphasizing conservative-Republican frames over liberal-Democratic ones. In short, there is much more evidence for indexing than there is for conservative or liberal bias claims.

The frames I used to examine the 2007 wage debate were derived from the 1996 study, as the parameters of debate over the minimum wage revolve around reoccurring themes. Attention to the “minimum wage causes unemployment” frame still outnumbered attention to the competing liberal frame that challenges this claim, likely a result of the fact that the “unemployment effects” frame has been so well established among economists for so many years, and empirical challenges to this frame are relatively newer – appearing within the last two decades.

TABLE VI

MINIMUM WAGE (2007) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ⁴³					
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>
No Unemployment Effects	9	0	11	0	0
Common Man	26	33	11	27	50
Stagnation-Inflation	20	11	0	16	25
Con Frames					
Unemployment Effects	17	22	0	8	0
Labor Pandering	0	0	0	0	0
Taxes/Tax Cuts	29	33	78	49	25

This likelihood is seen most clearly in reporting from the *New York Times*, which infrequently “revisit[ed]” the “minimum wage *axiom*” (emphasis added) that raising the minimum wage causes job losses: “though economists still maintain that the axiom is true,” since “most economists believe that imposing a minimum wage will generally increase joblessness at the bottom.”⁴⁴ When debates over whether the minimum wage causes higher unemployment were discussed in reporting, stories were careful to reference the most prominent economists undertaking research in this area, including those challenging the “axiom,” such as Alan Krueger and David Card, and defenders of the axiom, such as David Neumark.⁴⁵

As with the 1996 content analysis, the 2007 analysis finds that the “labor pandering” frame, in which Republicans attack Democrats as beholden to labor, is marginalized in comparison to the “common man” frame. This second frame, again, focuses attention on the needs of “ordinary” workers,

working families, and the importance of fighting poverty through paying higher wages to low income workers. The “labor pandering” frame did not appear in a single story analyzed. In contrast, the Republican “tax cut” frame received the most attention of all conservative arguments. This likely reflects President Bush and Congressional Republicans’ prioritization of the tax issue, and their insistence that any wage increase be accompanied by tax breaks for businesses. The tax cut frame was the most commonly occurring frame across all those analyzed, reflecting the power of the president and his congressional supporters to set the agenda, even in times when the opposing party enjoys a modest advantage in the news media.

The tax cut frame was far more prominent than the “earnings-inflation” frame. Strongly representative of the tax cut frame were the comments of House Republican and ranking member of the Education and Labor Committee Howard McKeon, who stated that “The Democratic leadership’s unbalanced proposal may increase the minimum wage, but it leaves small businesses and their workers to fend for themselves”; McKeon personally introduced a “competing minimum wage bill,” the *New York Times* reported, “that include[d] billions of dollars in tax breaks” that “would allow faster depreciation for newly built restaurants,” among other tax cuts.⁴⁶ These cuts, as Bush and Congressional Republicans marketed them, promised “relief for small businesses that might face increased labor costs.”⁴⁷

While Republicans were focusing on the earnings and profits of businesses, Democrats put poverty at the top of their agenda. The *New York Times* reported the announcement of Democratic Representative and Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee George Miller that “it is a moral outrage that millions of Americans who work full time still live in poverty,”⁴⁸ while the *Chicago Sun Times* quoted Miller’s claim that “for 10 years the lowest-paid Americans have been frozen out” in light of their stagnating earnings and the failure to raise the minimum wage.⁴⁹ Cable news coverage, although often characterized as catering to liberal and conservative partisan audiences, displayed a

commitment to exploring both the Republican and Democratic sides of the debate. *Fox News*, while devoting more time to conservative frames, still made a conscious effort to discuss liberal perspectives. Notably, its coverage did not overwhelmingly stress conservative positions, as conservative frames failed to appear at least 20 percentage points more often (as a percent of all frames mentioned) than liberal frames. *MSNBC*, in contrast, strongly privileged liberal positions, which comprised 75 percent of all frames appearing in news stories run by the organization. A closer examination of *MSNBC*'s programming demonstrates the prioritization of Democratic and liberal voices in relation to the "common man" frame and discussion of working families. In one example on the *Hardball* program with Chris Matthews, the late Elizabeth Edwards (wife of former Democratic Presidential candidate John Edwards) stressed the long history of women who "work in minimum wage jobs." She proposed a minimum wage increase as part of a progressive agenda to aid women in "being able to support their families."⁵⁰ This personalization placed a human-interest angle into reporting, rather than portraying the working poor as a faceless entity.

3. Partisan Mentions in the News

A final set of empirical tests encompasses news organizations' mentions of each party and mentions of their most prominent leaders. These tests confirm the indexing model over the competing models. Table VII finds that, in the 1996 debate, Republican Party and leadership mentions outnumbered Democratic ones by 16 percent, 8 percent, and 14 percentage points in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and *CBS*. None of these margins, however, are large enough to constitute dominance of reporting, as established in the hegemonic model. Instead, the indexing model is verified, with Republican Party and leader mentions failing to dominate Democratic ones by at least 20 percentage points across all news outlets. While Republican mentions do appear somewhat more

regularly across all three news organizations, this does not constitute overwhelming evidence of Republican dominance of the minimum wage debate.

TABLE VII

MINIMUM WAGE (1996) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS⁵¹		
News Outlet	Democratic (as % of all partisan mentions)	Republican (as % of all partisan mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	42	58
<i>Sun Times</i>	46	54
<i>CBS</i>	43	57

This is the case, first because of the relatively weak Republican partisan advantage, and second because the findings in Tables III and V fail to document a similar Republican advantage. Quite the contrary, the frequency of Democratic and Republican frames are nearly equal in Table V, whereas Democratic voices only slightly dominate Republican ones in six of the seven categories analyzed in Table III. These findings do not constitute evidence of a persistent Republican dominance.

The review of various mentions for parties and their leaders for the 2007 minimum wage also reiterates the predictive power of indexing. A discussion of the specific leaders appearing in the news was already undertaken earlier in this chapter, and accompanied the descriptions of the empirical findings from Tables III and IV. Those descriptions are not repeated here, as I focus instead on the aggregate statistical findings for party and party leader mentions. Democrats were better represented in partisan mentions for story headlines, leads, quoted sources, and frames. Again, however,

Democratic privileging is not at extraordinarily high levels, as Democratic mentions fail to overshadow Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points in three of the five news outlets seen in Table VIII. These findings reinforce the importance of the indexing model for the 2007 minimum wage case study.

TABLE VIII

MINIMUM WAGE (2007) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS ⁵²		
News Outlet	Democratic (as % of all Partisan Mentions)	Republican (as % of all Partisan Mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	50	50
<i>Sun Times</i>	60	40
<i>CBS</i>	63	37
<i>MSNBC</i>	71	29
<i>Fox</i>	60	40

Democratic mentions outnumber Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points in two of the five outlets, representing a partial confirmation of the liberal media model. The liberal media model, however, still fails to explain coverage in the majority of outlets in question. The hegemonic model completely fails here, as Republican mentions do not dominate Democratic ones in any of the news outlets that I reviewed.

4. Interpreting Final Results for the Minimum Wage

Aggregate findings from this chapter suggest that the indexing model is the most successful in predicting patterns in media coverage. Indexing accurately predicts media coverage in 37 of 44 possible tests of headlines, story leads, quoted sources, frames, and party mentions, or 84 percent of the time, with regard to the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage cases. The liberal media model in contrast, predicts the direction of media bias in just six of 30, or 20 percent of all possible tests of that model. Finally, the pluralistic model succeeds in predicting coverage in none of the 14 tests available for the pluralist model, while the hegemonic model predicts reporting in just one of 30 available tests, or three percent of the time. It is true that Democrats were more likely to receive favorable coverage in the 2007 minimum wage debate, when compared to the 1996 debate. This finding, upon closer inspection, does not necessarily invalidate the indexing model. Indexing still predicts coverage more consistently than the liberal model in the case of the 2007 debate, since Democratic sources were not overwhelmingly dominant in reporting.

There was good reason to suspect in advance that Democrats would be modestly privileged in 2007, but not in 1996. The 2007 minimum wage dispute was characterized by an abdication on the part of the president in terms of his failure to make opposition to the minimum wage a serious concern. Furthermore, the short time frame of the debate appears to have played a major role in somewhat privileging Democratic positions. The majority of coverage of the 2007 minimum wage dispute in the *New York Times*, for example, took place in January 2007, a month that accounted for nearly 65 percent of all coverage. The majority of coverage appeared in this month, despite the fact that it took until mid-year (May) for a final minimum wage bill to be passed by Congress and the president. Within this short period of coverage, Democrats were strongly united and effectively organized in pursuing their “first 100 hours” political agenda, in which the minimum wage was a major component. Finally, the relatively stronger (although still minority) support among Republicans for a “clean” bill to raise the minimum

wage in 2007 stood in contrast to the stronger opposition from Republicans in 1996, when the party overwhelmingly refused to consider a similar “clean” bill. All of these factors appear to have played an important role in setting the conditions necessary for the modest privileging of Democratic views over Republican ones. Such privilege, however, was not enough to ensure strong Democratic dominance of reporting. As the indexing model accurately predicted, reporting on the 2007 minimum wage was generally split between coverage of Democratic and Republican voices in a period defined by divided partisan control of the national government.

5. Editorials, Commentary, and the Minimum Wage

An analysis of the editorials and op-eds in the news outlets included here suggests that these outlets are mixed in their expression of both liberal and conservative perspectives. The balancing of both liberal-Democratic and conservative-Republican positions is what one would expect under the indexing model, rather than under the liberal or hegemonic models. The prominence of non-state actors, which I find throughout this study, is confirmation of the power of the pluralist model – at least as applied to the op-ed page of major newspapers.

In both 1996 and 2007, the editorials in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times* were more likely to express pro-minimum wage viewpoints. In 2007, *Fox News* pundits were more likely to stress a conservative position, while *MSNBC* pundits were more likely to be divided between liberal and conservative attitudes. *CBS* was not included in this study because its news programs, adhering to standards of objectivity, refrain from explicitly taking a position either way on the minimum wage. In affirming the pluralist model, I find that more than half of all op-ed writers addressing the minimum wage were non-state actors.

In reviewing columns and editorials, I qualitatively analyzed the number of op-ed contributors that expressed an explicit position either in support of, or opposed to the minimum wage. Similarly, I

assessed whether the editorials of each newspaper shared any position that was sympathetic to or opposed to a higher minimum wage. Finally, I looked at the views of the hosts (pundits) of nightly programs on *MSNBC* and *Fox*, where liberal and conservative positions are openly expressed.

Opinions printed in the *New York Times* in 1996 and 2007 were more likely to be sympathetic to Democrats seeking to increase the minimum wage. In 1996, three op-ed writers expressed support, with just one writer opposing the minimum wage. Supportive op-eds explored a variety of views, including attacks on Republicans for being insensitive to American workers' needs, recommendations that Democrats raise the minimum wage as a way of improving workers' living standards, an emphasis on the minimum wage's purchasing power value as at an historic low, and discussion of the importance of raising its value in order to assist the working poor in paying for basic needs.⁵³ In 2007, two *New York Times'* op-ed writers supported a wage increase, whereas just one opposed it. Advocates focused on the minimum wage increase as a means of fighting poverty.⁵⁴ Opposition to the minimum emphasized the claim that a wage increase would lead to job losses among the working poor, and that it would produce higher business costs and increased prices for goods and services.⁵⁵

Editorials from the *New York Times* were uniformly positive with regard to a minimum wage increase. A 1996 editorial advocated "raising the minimum wage by a modest amount" as part of a national "anti-poverty strategy." Addressing conservative critics, the editors promised that the benefits from an increase would be "substantial"; "Will low-paid workers lose their jobs if employers must pay higher wages? Yes, but there is widespread agreement among economic studies that the impact would be very small."⁵⁶ Editorializing in 2007 also supported an increase, reluctantly so if it was coupled with more business tax cuts: "We would have preferred a straightforward minimum wage increase. But the House bill [allowing modest tax cuts] is a reasonable response to the Senate's refusal to move forward without tax cuts."⁵⁷

Patterns discernible in the *Chicago Sun Times* mirrored those of the *New York Times*. As a regional newspaper with a liberal reputation, the *Chicago Sun Times* consistently supported the minimum wage against its detractors. In the 1996 wage debate, the *Chicago Sun Times* printed op-eds from six different writers who supported a minimum wage increase, and from three who opposed it. Coverage in 2007 was more meager, with just one op-ed writer in favor and one against. The 1996 op-eds in favor of the minimum wage were written by a progressive economist, two regular columnists, and an editor for the paper. These articles included a number of themes, including challenges to the claim that the minimum wage causes job loss, discussions of the declining value of the minimum wage due to inflationary pressures, attention to the minimum wage increase as a basic issue of “fairness,” and a preoccupation with discussing the “human interest” angle, as explored through the stories of low pay workers.⁵⁸ The 2007 op-ed declared the importance of a minimum wage increase in fighting poverty.⁵⁹

Stories that opposed a wage increase touched upon similar themes explored throughout this chapter. The three op-ed writers in 1996 who shared opposition to the minimum wage warned of minimum wage-incited job losses and of the dangers of the increase to the economy more generally.⁶⁰ The single 2007 op-ed against the minimum wage predicted that an increase would entice more teens to drop out of school and join the workforce in search of a larger paycheck.⁶¹ In both cases, 1996 and 2007, the editors of the *Sun Times* expressed strong support for a raise in the minimum wage. The justifications promulgated by the editors included: the claim that the measure enjoyed strong public support, an argument against “flimsy” evidence of job losses, a promise that the raise would help the needy, and a declaration that the support for a raise from some Republicans undercut the legitimacy of opposition from the rest of the party.⁶²

A final area of analysis that must be addressed covers commentary from cable news outlets. *MSNBC* and *Fox News* were not in existence during the 1996 debate, although they were both well established by 2007. In the 2007 debate, one sees mixed evidence of media bias. Comments from the

Fox News punditry leaned against a wage increase, while *MSNBC* was mixed. Of its punditry-based programs (including those hosted by Tucker Carlson and Keith Olbermann), one host (Olbermann) expressed support for the minimum wage, while the other (Carlson) declared his opposition. Notable were the comments of conservative host Tucker Carlson, who asked “why should the government decide” on a base wage in a “free market” society.⁶³ In contrast, liberal host Keith Olbermann took issue specifically with Republican Representative Jack Kingston’s comment that those looking to escape poverty should not expect an increase in the minimum wage, but rather should simply work more hours. Olbermann lambasted Kingston for “hypocrisy,” in light of Kingston’s complaint that a Democratic plan to increase the length of the Congressional work week to five days “keeps us up here [in Washington] and eats away at families” while “marriages suffer.”⁶⁴ While the selection of cases here is limited, it appears that *MSNBC*’s pundits were split in their opinions of the minimum wage. This finding is less surprisingly considering the time that this debate took place (2007), which was one year before *MSNBC* announced its new night-time punditry-based lineup. That lineup, including Keith Olbermann, Rachel Maddow, Ed Schultz, and Chris Matthews, was dominated by liberal pundits who consistently allied themselves with the Democratic Party.

Fox News commentary was similarly strident, although cutting in the opposite direction. *Fox* punditry relied on Republican talking points in terms of opposing a wage raise, such as the claim that increasing workers’ pay would threaten business owners, among a variety of attacks made on Democrats.⁶⁵ Of *Fox*’s three night-time pundit-based programs in 2007 (*Hannity and Colmes*, *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, and *The O’Reilly Factor*), only Sean Hannity’s programs included positive and negative evaluations from hosts on the minimum wage. In those programs, Hannity expressed strong opposition to the minimum wage, while Colmes failed to explicitly take a stance on the minimum wage.⁶⁶ In short, what little evidence was available from nightly pundit programs suggested a

conservative bias at *Fox News*. That bias is explored at greater length in the other case studies in this dissertation.

This qualitative analysis of commentary on the minimum wage has produced split results. On the one hand, the *Chicago Sun Times* and *New York Times* clearly expressed liberal orientations toward the issue, although also running a minority of op-eds that were critical of a wage increase. In contrast, *MSNBC* and *Fox's* limited samples reveal mixed opinions, as seen from Tucker Carlson and Keith Olbermann on *MSNBC*, and fierce opposition, as seen from *Fox's* Sean Hannity. Such findings suggest that there is room for a variety of liberal and conservative viewpoints in national commentary. An extension of the analysis to include editorials of other major national newspapers from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New York Post* finds that editorials opposed to the minimum wage were rather common in the American press.⁶⁷ I briefly included these supplemental news sources here because of the relatively small sample size of outlets from which I drew findings when examining *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, the *New York Times*, and *Chicago Sun Times*. This smaller sample was acceptable for generalizing in the case of my content analysis of reporting, since it also included a broadcast network (*CBS*), and because one of the media outlets – the *Chicago Sun Times* – pulls its news reports from national newswires, while the other – the *New York Times* – is widely seen as the national “agenda setter” for the rest of the mass media. By including the *Chicago Sun Times* in my content analysis, I was not only analyzing a single regional paper, but also the news coverage disseminated across the entire country to local media markets (which overwhelmingly rely on newswire stories) of all kinds. My expanded findings, after taking into account the editorials from other newspapers, suggest that editorial comments throughout the most prominent national newspapers are not one-dimensionally liberal, as one might conclude after only surveying the two outlets (the *Chicago Sun Times* and *New York Times*) included in this dissertation. The expression of a variety of liberal and conservative

positions is what one would expect under the indexing model, rather than under the hegemonic or liberal models. This pattern is precisely what one finds in my extended analysis of national editorials.

F. Conclusion

This chapter undertook an analysis of reporting and editorializing on the minimum wage during 1996 and 2007. These two cases occurred under divided government. In 1996, the conflict took place between a Democratic president and Republican congress; in 2007, the dispute was between a Republican president and Democratic congress. The evidence presented suggests that the liberal and hegemonic models fail to accurately predict patterns seen within reporting, op-eds, and editorializing, when evaluating the media outlets in question, and when taking into account a larger sample of national editorials. The pluralist model receives only limited confirmation in this study, since eight non-state actors appeared in op-eds in 1997 and 2007, whereas no government officials do. Non-state actors constituted 75 percent and 33 percent of all op-ed writers in the *New York Times* for 1996 and 2007 respectively, and 43 percent and 0 percent of all op-ed writers in the *Chicago Sun Times* for 1996 and 2007 respectively. These actors included a variety of non-governmental actors such as business professors and economists, a banking industry representative, a think tank representative, and a labor lawyer. In three of these four cases, the frequency of non-state actors reaches or exceeds the 33 percent threshold established for the pluralist model in my predictions. While state actors (government officials) do not appear in a single column, this does not mean that the indexing model is invalidated. Such actors may not retain a direct presence in op-eds, but their positions are clearly indirectly driving the entire debate between those expressing conservative and liberal positions. These positions fall in line with those discussed in Washington by Democratic and Republican political leaders – a strong affirmation of the indexing model.

In sum, the indexing model appears to be the most consistently powerful in predicting media content across reporting, editorials, and op-eds. The pluralist model is effective only in explaining the sourcing of op-eds, although completely ineffective in predicting news coverage. Finally, the hegemonic and liberal models are ineffective across reporting, editorials, and op-eds in accounting for patterns observed in the national news. These models are again examined in the next few chapters, as I find similar results with regard to the usefulness of media indexing, and the more limited utility of pluralist, hegemonic, and liberal models.

Notes

¹ Associated Press, "A Call for Debate on Minimum Wage," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 February 1995, http://articles.sfgate.com/1995-02-17/news/17796509_1_minimum-wage-wage-increases-dick-armey-r-texas

² Associated Press, "A Call for Debate on Minimum Wage," 1995.

³ Doyle McManus and James Risen, "Clinton to Seek 75-Cent Boost in Minimum Wage," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 1995, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-01-24/news/mn-23800_1_minimum-wage

⁴ Dennis L. Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (Newbury Park, CA.: Pine Forge Press, 2010).

⁵ David Neumark, "How Living Wage Laws Affect Low-Wage Workers and Low-Income Families," *Public Policy Institute of California*, 2002, http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_302DNR.pdf

⁶ These calculations are based upon my own examination of states that raise and fail to raise the minimum wage between 2001 to 2005. The information was gathered from the Bureau of Labor Statistics information on food median service workers' earnings and employment levels state-by-state in the years before and after state minimum wage raises.

⁷ Jared Bernstein, "Minimum Wage and Its Effects on Small Business," *Economic Policy Institute*, 29 April 2004, http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/webfeatures_viewpoints_raising_minimum_wage_2004/

⁸ Liana Fox, "Minimum Wage Trends: Understanding Past and Contemporary Research," *Economic Policy Institute*, 8 November 2006, <https://www.policyarchive.org/bitstream/handle/10207/8032/bp178.pdf?sequence=1>

⁹ David Neumark, "Minimum Wage Effects in the Post-Welfare Era," *Economic Policy Institute*, January 2007, http://www.epionline.org/study_print.cfm?sid-103

¹⁰ Fox, "Minimum Wage Trends," 2006; Marvin H. Koters, ed., *The Effects of the Minimum Wage on Employment* (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1996); Matthew B. Kibbe, "The Minimum Wage: Washington's Perennial Myth," *CATO Institute*, 23 May 1988, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa106.html>; Gerard F. Adams, "Increasing the Minimum Wage: The Macroeconomic Impacts," *Economic Policy Institute*, July 1987; Yale Brozen, "Wage Rates, Minimum Wage Laws, and Unemployment," *New Individualist Review*, Vol. 4 (Spring): 24-

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¹¹ Victor Fuchs, Alan Krueger, and James Poterba, "Economists' Views About Parameters, Values, and Policies: Survey Results in Labor and Public Economics," *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 36 (September 1998): 1387-1425.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of the Phillips Curve, see Ch. 3 in the following work: Christopher R. Martin, *Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹³ Paul Wolfson, "State Minimum Wages: A Policy That Works," *Economic Policy Institute*, 27 November 2006, <http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp176/>; H. Luke Shaefer and Bruce Nissen, "The Florida Minimum Wage After One Year," *Florida International University*, May 2006, http://www.risep-fiu.org/reports/Florida_Minimum_Wage_Report.pdf; William E. Spriggs and Bruce W. Klein, "Raising the Floor: The Effect of the Minimum Wage on Low Wage Workers," *Economic Policy Institute*, 1994; Allison Wellington, "Effects of the Minimum Wage on the Employment Status of Youths: An Update," *Journal of Human Resources*, Winter 1991, 26(1), 27-46; Dale Belman and Paul Wolfson, "A Time Series Analysis of Employment, Wages, and the Minimum Wage," *University of Minnesota*, Unpublished Paper, 1997; Dale Belman and Paul Wolfson, "The Minimum Wage: the Bark is Worse than the Bite," *University of Minnesota*, Unpublished Paper, 1998; William Evans and Mark Turner, "Employment Effects of Minimum Wage and Subminimum Wage," *Journal of Business and Economic Statistics*, 1995; John Schmitt, "The Minimum Wage and Job Loss: Opponents of Wage Hike Find No Effect," *Economic Policy Institute*, 1996, http://www.epi.org/page/-/old/briefingpapers/minimumw_bp_1996.pdf; Arindrajit Dube, "Minimum Wage Effects Across State Borders: Estimates Using Contiguous Counties," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, November 2010.

¹⁴ James Parrott, "State Minimum Wages and Employment in Small Businesses," *Fiscal Policy Institute*, 20 April 2004, http://www.fiscalpolicy.org/press_040421.stm; Jerold Waltman, Allan McBride, and Nicole Camhout, "Minimum Wage Increases and the Business Failure Rate," *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 32 (1), March 1998.

¹⁵ Fox, "Minimum Wage Trends," 2006.

¹⁶ See: Wall Street Journal, "The Young and the Jobless," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2009, 12(A); Walter J. Wessels, "The Effect of the Minimum Wages on the Labor Force Participation Rates of Teenagers," *Employment Policy Institute*, May 2001, http://epionline.org/study_wessels_05-2001.pdf; Joseph J. Sabia, "The Effect of the Minimum Wage Increases on Retail and Small Business Employment," *Employment Policy Institute*, May 2006, http://epionline.org/study_detail.cfm?sid=98; Nicole Coomer and Walter J. Wessels, "The Erosion of the Entry-Level Job Market: Minimum Wages and Their Impact on Minimum Wage Workers," *Economic Policy Institute*, August 2010, http://epionline.org/study_detail.cfm?sid=129; William E. Even and David A. Macpherson, "Unequal Harm: Racial Disparities in the Employment Consequences of Minimum Wage Increases," *Employment Policy Institute*, May 2011, http://epionline.org/study_detail.cfm?sid=137

¹⁷ Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 227.

¹⁸ Robert Whaples, "Do Economists Agree on Anything? Yes!" *The Economists' Voice*, 2006, Vol. 3 (9).

¹⁹ Anthony R. DiMaggio, "Party or Distributive Politics: The Political Economy of the Minimum Wage," Unpublished Paper, 2007.

²⁰ Benjamin I. Page and James R. Simmons, *What Governments Can Do: Dealing With Poverty and Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

²¹ David Card and Alan B. Krueger, *Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Neumark, "Minimum Wage Effects in the Post-Reform Era," *Economic Policy Institute*, January 2007, http://www.epionline.org/studies/Neumark_2007.pdf

²² My survey of available books and scholarly journal articles covering media framing of economic issues turn up no studies of the minimum wage to date. As with many other economic issues, the minimum wage appears to have received no attention in terms of the media's coverage of this issue.

²³ John Schmitt and Jared Bernstein, "Out of Date on the Minimum Wage," *Economic Policy Institute*, 5 June 1996, http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/webfeatures_viewpoints_minwage96/

²⁴ Adam Clymer, "Clinton and Dole Clash on Delay Of Wage and Gas-Tax Measures," *New York Times*, 9 May 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/09/us/clinton-and-dole-clash-on-delay-of-wage-and-gas-tax-measures.html>

²⁵ Clymer, "Clinton and Dole Clash on Delay Of Wage and Gas-Tax Measures," 1996.

²⁶ Michael Wines, "Republicans Seeking to Counter Democrats Over Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 25 April 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/25/us/republicans-seeking-to-counter-democrats-over-minimum-wage.html>; Christiane Zappone, "House Passes Minimum Wage Hike Bill," *CNN.com*, 11 January 2007, http://money.cnn.com/2007/01/10/news/economy/minimum_wage/index.htm

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²⁸ Christiane Zappone, "Minimum Wage Hike Coming – but Maybe with Strings," *CNN.com*, 4 January 2007, http://money.cnn.com/2007/01/04/pf/minimum_wage/

²⁹ For Table 3.1, inter-coder reliability tests were undertaken for my coding and that of the two supplemental coders – more specifically for individual measurements covering headlines, story leads, and quoted sources. For headlines, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was: 97% and 100% for *New York Times* headlines; 97% and 99% for *New York Times* leads; and 93% and 93% for *New York Times* quoted sources. For the *Chicago Sun Times* reliability tests were as follows: 100% and 99% for headlines; 96% and 94% for leads; and 94% and 91% for quoted sources. For *CBS*: reliability tests were as follows: 97% and 99% for headlines. No tests were included for *MSNBC* and *Fox*, since those cable news outlets did not yet exist.

³⁰ Eric Schmitt, "Senate Sees an Opportunity and Seizes It," *New York Times*, 12 June 1996; <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/12/us/senate-sees-an-opportunity-and-seizes-it.html>; Steven Greenhouse, "Minimum-Pay Rise Could Have Vast Effects on the Northeast," *New York Times*, 12 May 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/12/nyregion/minimum-pay-rise-could-have-vast-effects-on-the-northeast.html>; Andre F. Chung, "Restaurateurs to Spend \$1 Million to Fight Minimum-Wage Increase," *Chicago Sun Times*, 20 May 1996, 57; Vicki Torres, "Small Business Split on Minimum Wage; Industry and Ideology Lead to Differences," *Chicago Sun Times*, 30 April 1996, 41.

³¹ Francine Knowles, "Fight for Wage Hike, SEIU Members Urged," *Chicago Sun Times*, 23 April 1996, 54.; Andre F. Chung, "Restaurateurs to Spend \$ 1 Million To Fight Minimum-Wage Increase," *Chicago Sun Times*, 20 May 1996, 57.; Mary A. Mitchell, "Single Working Moms Fight Outdated System," *Chicago Sun Times*, 12 May 1996, 21.; Steven Greenhouse, "POLITICS: THE UNIONS," *Chicago Sun Times*, 22 February 1996, 6(B).; Steven Greenhouse, "Labor Leader Calls Buchanan Workers' Enemy," *New York Times*, 22 February 1996, 6 (B); Steven Greenhouse, "Labor Leader Plans Little Steps to Big Economic-Political Goal," *New York Times*, 16 February 1996, 18; Peter T. Kilborn, "Labor Movement Endorses the President," *New York Times*, 26 March 1996, 4(B); Brett Pulley, "State Knows a Thing or Two About the Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 28 April 1996, 13(NJ).

³² For Table 3.2, inter-coder reliability tests were undertaken for my coding and that of the two supplemental coders – more specifically for individual measurements covering headlines, story leads, and quoted sources. For headlines, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was: 99% and 100% for *New York Times* headlines; 100% and 100% for *New York Times* leads; and 99% and 94% for *New York Times* quoted sources. For the *Chicago Sun Times* reliability tests were 100% and 100% for headlines; 100% and 97% for leads; and 100% and 91% for quoted sources. For *CBS*: reliability tests were 100% and 100% for headlines. For *MSNBC* tests of leads, reliability was 100% and 97%; for *Fox News* tests, reliability was 96% and 99%.

³³ Carl Hulse, “House, by a Wide Margin, Backs Minimum-Wage Rise,” *New York Times*, 11 January 2007, 28(A); Timothy Egan, “For \$7.93 an Hour, It’s Worth A Trip Across the State Line,” *New York Times*, 11 January 2007, 1(A).

³⁴ For Table 3.3, inter-coder reliability tests were undertaken for my coding and that of the two supplemental coders – more specifically for individual measurements covering liberal and conservative story frames. For story frames, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was 92% and 88% for the *New York Times*; 93% and 91% for the *Chicago Sun Times*, and 93% and 97% for *CBS*.

³⁵ Adam Clymer, “Dole Blocks Vote on Raising Minimum Wage,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1996, 1(A); Robert G. Hershey Jr., “An Increase in Wages May Hurt Some Teen-Agers,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1996, 1(D).

³⁶ Hershey, “An Increase in Wages May Hurt Some Teen-Agers,” 1996; Bob Ringham, “Battle of Minimum Wage Fought with Minimal Data,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 5 February 1996, 45; Brian Tumulty, “Minimum-Wage Flight Moves to Senate Floor,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 26 March 1996, 40.

³⁷ Adam Clymer, “Minimum Pay Bill Falls Short in Senate,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1996, 10(B); Clymer, “Dole Blocks Vote on Raising Minimum Wage,” 1996.

³⁸ Adam Clymer, “Clinton and Dole Clash on Delay Of Wage and Gas-Tax Measures,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1996, 6(A); Clymer, “Dole Blocks Vote on Raising Minimum Wage” 1996.

³⁹ Clymer, “Minimum Pay Bill Falls Short in Senate,” 1996; Peter T. Kilborn, “Republicans Are Up in Arms at Labor’s Political Rebirth,” *New York Times*, 3 April 1996, 3(A).

⁴⁰ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Dole Concedes Wage Increase Will Win Vote,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1996, 1(A).

⁴¹ David E. Sanger, “A Report Tries To Counteract Job-Loss Fears,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1996, 1(D).

⁴² Alison Mitchell, “Attack and Parry: Taxes Set Political Pace,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1996, 9(A); Ed Bradley, “House Leaders Say They’ll Block Minimum Wage Increase; Suggest Tax Breaks for Business and Working Families Instead,” *CBS*, 24 April 1996, 6:30 PM ET.

⁴³ For Table 3.4, inter-coder reliability tests were undertaken for my coding and that of the two supplemental coders – more specifically for individual measurements covering liberal and conservative story frames. For story frames, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was 100% and 98% for the *New York Times*; 100% and 100% for the *Chicago Sun Times*, and 97% and 100% for *CBS*, 93% and 98% for *MSNBC*, and 97% and 100% for *Fox News*.

⁴⁴ Eduardo Porter, “Revisiting a Minimum-Wage Axiom,” *New York Times*, 4 February 2007, 4(C).

⁴⁵ Porter, “Revisiting a Minimum-Wage Axiom,” 2007.

⁴⁶ Steven R. Greenhouse, "Tax Cut Measure Could Be a Stumbling Block for Increase in Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 10 January 2007, 18(A).

⁴⁷ Bloomberg, "Effort to Move on Minimum Wage Bill Falts in Senate," *New York Times*, 25 January 2007, 19(A).

⁴⁸ Greenhouse, "Tax Cut Measure Could Be a Stumbling Block for Increase in Minimum Wage," 2007.

⁴⁹ David Espo, "\$7.25 Minimum Wage OK'd – Changes to Come," *Chicago Sun Times*, 11 January 2007.

⁵⁰ Chris Matthews, "Hardball," *MSNBC*, 26 April 2007, 5 PM EST.

⁵¹ Inter-coder reliability tests were not needed for my examination of party and party leader mentions. To undertake this analysis, I simply needed to collect a list of all the major Republican and Democratic leaders in congress and the executive. Next, I searched for these key figures, in addition to any references to "Republicans," "Democrats," and the "GOP" via the *Lexis Nexis* database. I simply summed up all these mentions, which were found via computerized analysis by *Lexis Nexis*.

⁵² Inter-coder reliability tests were not needed for my examination of party and party leader mentions. For more on this, see endnote 51 from this chapter.

⁵³ Mark Levinson, "The Buchanan Manifesto," *New York Times*, 25 January 1996, 27(A); Thomas Geoghegan, "The State of the Worker," *New York Times*, 5 February 1996, 21(A); Bob Herbert, "In America; Sliding Pay Scale," *New York Times*, 5 February 1996, 15(A).

⁵⁴ Paul Krugman, "On Being Partisan," *The New York Times*, 26 January 2007, 21(A); Bob Herbert, "The Millions Left Out," *New York Times*, 12 May 2007, 15(A).

⁵⁵ Sarah Hamersma, "The Bare Minimum," *New York Times*, 8 March 2007, *The New York Times*, 23(A); W. Michael Cox, "It's Not a Wage Gap, But an Age Gap," *New York Times*, 21 April 1996, 15(A).

⁵⁶ Editorial, "Boost the Minimum Wage," *New York Times*, 5 April 1996, 26(A).

⁵⁷ Editorial, "Minimum Wage, Minimum Tax Cuts," *New York Times*, 15 February 2007, 28(A).

⁵⁸ Mark Weisbrot, "The 90-Cent Question," *Chicago Sun Times*, 9 May 1996, 34; Molly Ivins, "Arney Leads Charge Against Minimum Wage Hike," *Chicago Sun Times*, 3 May 1996, 37; Carl Rowan, "Tales From the Dark Side of Dole," *Chicago Sun Times*, 23 April 1996, 37; Michelle Stevens, "Fair is Fair: Workers Deserve Living Wage," *Chicago Sun Times*, 22 April 1996, 35.

⁵⁹ Jesse Jackson, "Time to Push New Congress to Revive U.S.," *Chicago Sun Times*, 2 January 2007, 21.

⁶⁰ Richard B. Berman, "Illiterates Lose if Wage is Hiked," *Chicago Sun Times*, 6 April 1996, 12; Hasken Benishay, "Minimum Wage Increase is Tempting, But Wrong," *Chicago Sun Times*, 30 June 1996, 33; Robert Novak, "Retreat is Complete as House GOP Breaks Ranks," *Chicago Sun Times*, 30 May 1996, 27.

⁶¹ George Will, "The Wage of Fools: Minimum is Bad Idea," *Chicago Sun Times*, 4 January 2007, 27.

⁶² Editorial, "GOP in Losing Battle Over Minimum Wage," *Chicago Sun Times*, 29 April 1996, 31.

⁶³ Tucker Carlson, "Tucker," *MSNBC*, 5 January 2007, 4 PM EST.

⁶⁴ Keith Olbermann, "Countdown," *MSNBC*, 11 January 2007, 8 PM EST.

⁶⁵ Sean Hannity, "Interview with Mitch McConnell," *Fox News*, 4 January 2007, 9 PM EST; Sean Hannity, "Interview with Adam Smith, Jack Kingston," *Fox News*, 4 January 2007, 9 PM EST; Sean Hannity, "Pelosi Hypocrisy?," *Fox News*, 12 January 2007, 9 PM EST.

⁶⁶ Alan Colmes, "Hannity and Colmes," *Fox News*, 4 January 2007, 9 PM EST; Alan Colmes, "Hannity and Colmes," *Fox News*, 12 January 2007, 9 PM EST.

⁶⁷ Editorial, "Teen Jobs? Here's a Way," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 March 2010, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-03-23/news/ct-edit-editorial-wages-20100323_1_minimum-wage-teen-jobs-summer-youth-employment-program; Editorial, "The Young and the Jobless," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203440104574402820278669840.html>; Editorial, "Obama Eyes Interns," *Washington Times*, 7 April 2010, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/7/obama-eyes-interns/>; Editorial, "New York Living Wage Bill a Menace," *New York Post*, 13 May 2011, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/editorials/living_wage_killing_jobs_Qsmw1FGjUczjJax3D3xgoI

V. UNIFIED REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT: TAX CUTS AND SOCIAL SECURITY, 2001-2005

On Tax Cuts:

New York Times editorial

- "Mr. Bush's overly generous tax cut plan would wipe out virtually the entire remaining surplus. That would leave him no money to help, as he has promised, low-income families buy health insurance -- which could cost \$600 billion over 10 years -- or to add prescription drugs to Medicare, which could cost \$200 billion over 10 years."¹ January 2, 2001

Chicago Sun Times editorial

- "Bush's strategy tells us is that the tax cuts are based on principle: Bush believes in returning taxpayers' money when a surplus demonstrates the government is taking too much. He believes in tax cuts for all who pay income taxes."² February 26, 2001

On Social Security:

Paul Krugman, progressive economist and *New York Times* Columnist

- "Many pundits and editorial boards still give Mr. Bush credit for trying to 'reform' Social Security. In fact, Mr. Bush came to bury Social Security, not to save it. Over time, the Bush plan would have transformed Social Security from a social insurance program into a mutual fund, with nothing except a name in common with the system F.D.R. created."³ August 15, 2005

George Will, conservative pundit

- "Voluntary personal accounts will allow competing fund managers, rather than a government monopoly on income transfers from workers to retirees, to allocate a large pool of money. This will enhance the economic dynamism conducive to an open society. Personal accounts will respect individuals' autonomy and competence, and will narrow the wealth gap by facilitating the accumulation of wealth – bequeathable wealth – by people of modest incomes."⁴ January 20, 2005

In the early post-2000 period, Republican political ascendancy was accompanied by a number of intense partisan disputes. Arguments regarding the supposed benefits and drawbacks of President George W. Bush's proposed tax cuts were intensely disputed. As the above comments suggest, supporters framed the issue as a principled question of promoting smaller, responsible government, with detractors emphasizing the strain that tax cuts might place on meeting the growing costs of popular social welfare programs. The debate over Social Security was similarly polarized. With regard

to Social Security reform, advocates of Bush's plan to establish individual savings accounts painted the program as entering fiscal crisis, in contrast to investment accounts, which they claimed produced better financial returns for those entering retirement. Opponents responded by warning that Bush's plan was tantamount to privatization, and that his proposal would terminate Social Security as a collectivized retirement program that is able to allocate stable, guaranteed benefits. In short, there was no shortage of controversy for both of these public policy issues.

In this chapter, I assess the mass media's coverage of tax cuts and Social Security reform under a period of unified Republican government. As with Chapter 3, I test the competing liberal, hegemonic, pluralist, and indexing models, analyzing story headlines, leads, quoted sources, competing frames, and op-ed and editorial content. I find that, as with reporting on the minimum wage, coverage is best explained according to the indexing model, although far less so by the pluralist and liberal media models. The hegemonic model is a consistent predictor of content, although its effectiveness is likely a product of Republican control of government, and as a result, Republican dominance of the news. The hegemonic model's inability to accurately predict coverage across many policy issues is addressed throughout this dissertation.

A. Tax Cuts Enter the Public Agenda

A review of the political and intellectual discourse on President Bush's 2001 tax cuts is first necessary before examining media coverage. Arguments made in favor of and against the Bush cuts revolved around philosophical questions regarding the proper role of government, and pragmatic issues such as whether the tax cuts were affordable. Setting the stage for the public discussion of tax cuts was reporting from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office that projected a \$5.6 trillion federal budget surplus from 2001 through the end of the decade. Of this estimated surplus, \$2.4

trillion originated from excess Social Security payroll taxes, with the remaining \$3.122 trillion “up for grabs,” as the *New York Times* reported.

As the Bush administration argued, the surplus was supposedly large enough to cover not only the \$1.6 trillion in proposed tax cuts, in addition to increased military spending, health care, and education, without increasing the national deficit or debt. The CBO also calculated that with the projected surplus, and after paying for the tax cuts, the federal government could lower the total national debt to \$800 billion (of what was then a total of \$3.4 trillion in national debt) by the end of the decade. Such optimistic projections were thrown into question by 2008, when the escalating economic crisis and recession emerged, since the CBO’s original estimates were based upon the assumption that the national economy would grow by 2.4 percent in 2001, by 3.4 percent in 2002, and continue at a rate of three percent for the rest of the decade. These rosy predictions would later be proven inaccurate following the 2008 economic collapse and ensuing recession and stagnation that continued past the end of the decade. Those events, and the ensuing national debt of nearly \$14.5 trillion by mid 2011, were clearly beyond the foresight of the Congressional Budget Office. Consistent deficit spending throughout the entirety of the Bush administration also ensured that deficit reduction would not materialize during his presidency.

Academics, researchers and think tanks debating the 2001 tax cuts were limited in their analyses by the events and information of their day, rather than those that would emerge over the next ten years. In 2001, conservatives seized upon the projected \$5.6 trillion federal surplus as evidence that the government could easily afford Bush’s proposed tax cuts. The *Heritage Foundation*, for example, projected that the tax cuts could be pursued alongside a policy of debt reduction that would see the entire national debt fall to zero by 2010. Under this projection, *Heritage* advocated for the tax cuts under the promise that they would increase aggregate family income for a family of four (after adjusting for inflation) by \$4,544 from 2001 through 2011. *Heritage* also claimed that the tax cuts would

significantly improve economic growth by an average of .2 percentage points a year from 2002 through 2011; unemployment would also fall to 4.7 percent, the group estimated, within the same period.⁵

Conservative and Republican support for tax cuts was derived in great part from “Supply Side” economics – a neoclassical school of thought which frames economic growth as best pursued through the reduction of barriers for producers (suppliers) of goods and services.⁶ As the economic theory argues, policies such as lowering taxes on businesses investors and consumers are the most effective way to direct increased financial resources toward individuals and businesses, which are in a position to invest those resources in economic expansion, growth, and consumption. In some variants of Supply Side theory, the tax cuts granted toward businesses and investors are promised to “trickle down” to the public, as businesses invest by creating new jobs, thereby sharing their newfound wealth with American workers who are also promised to benefit as the economy grows.⁷ Many Supply Side advocates, drawing inspiration from economist Arthur Laffer, argue that lowering tax rates will even increase tax revenues, as they claim that such actions will promote strong economic growth, thereby leading to increased tax collections as a result of that growth.⁸

Critics of the Bush administration’s tax cut plan were much more cautious in their budget estimates. The liberal *Economic Policy Institute (EPI)* challenged the optimistic growth predictions of the CBO and conservative groups due to the “uncertainty of 10-year outcomes” as related to macro-economic issues. *EPI* argued that the tax cuts would likely translate into decreased government revenue: “Budget projections are an art, not a science...the CBO projections are problematic because they are just that – rough guesses of what will happen in a hard-to-know future.” CBO estimates, the organization argued, “contain a large amount of guesswork,” while the consequences of the tax cuts, on the other hand,” include “permanent reductions in government revenue.” Pushing for a large tax cut in light of such uncertainty, *EPI* argued, amounted to “bad policy.”⁹

1. Background to the 2001 Tax Cuts

President Bush's promise to cut taxes traced back to the 2000 campaign. In the run-up to 2000 election, Bush promised to "reduce tax rates for everyone in every bracket."¹⁰ Lawrence Lindsey, Bush's head electoral advisor, claimed that the tax plan would achieve greater transparency in the tax code, while "preserving a balanced budget and allowing a pay-down of the national debt."¹¹ Following Bush's narrow victory in the 2000 election, he quickly began to lobby the public and members of congress in favor of his plan. Bush had good reason to think that his tax cut plan would receive congressional support and be passed into law, in one form or another, in light of majority Republican control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. By February of 2001, Bush had already sent his tax cut proposal to congress, urging that a plan be passed as soon as possible.¹²

An intense partisan battle raged in congress over the size of Bush's proposed tax cuts. Democrats complained that the cuts were far too large and too biased toward the wealthy, as they offered their own plan with smaller cuts that were targeted at less affluent beneficiaries.¹³ While a few Republican members of congress balked at the size of the Bush plan, most stood strongly behind the president as the House of Representatives passed a bill in early March, 2001 valued at nearly \$1 trillion. In the Republican controlled Senate, the cuts that were passed totaled \$1.19 trillion, with 15 Democrats breaking ranks to support the bill, along with all 50 Republican Senators.¹⁴ The differences between the competing House and Senate bills had to be worked out in conference committee. As a final compromise was agreed upon, both chambers put forward an estimated \$1.35 trillion in cuts – \$300 billion less than the original amount called for by President Bush.¹⁵

On June 7, President Bush signed into law "The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Act of 2001." The bill provided for reductions in the income, gift, and estate taxes, which would remain in place until the bill expired in 2010. The income tax portion of Bush's legislation reduced tax rates for all income brackets, creating a maximum taxable rate of 35 percent (down from 39.6 percent) for Americans in the

top income category. Those in lower brackets saw average cuts of three percent (compared to the 4.6 percent reduction for those in the top income bracket). These tax cuts would later be revisited in 2003, when the federal government accelerated some of the cuts, while adding others that applied to the alternative minimum tax and dividends and capital gains taxes. The legacy of the Bush tax cuts would remain with the government and American people for more than a decade, however, with congress and the Obama administration agreeing to temporarily extend them through 2012 as a part of bi-partisan compromise legislation that also extended unemployment benefits for out-of-work Americans.

2. Reporting the Bush Tax Cuts

Journalists consistently highlighted the strong partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans on President Bush's tax cut proposal. A sample of headlines conveying this conflict included: "Bush Faces Group of Harsh Critics: House Democrats" (*NY Times*), "Suggesting Smaller Cuts, Democrats Say Republican Tax Plan is Too Risky" (*NY Times*), and "Tug-of-War Over Taxes; Bush Sends \$1.6 Trillion Plan to Congress; Dems Say it's Skewed" (*Chicago Sun Times*), among many others.

3. Framing Tax Cuts

When evaluating reporting on the Bush tax cuts, I measured the three most common frames appearing among political supporters and opponents. These frames were drawn from the arguments discussed above, expressed by experts in the study of political economy. These frames were also determined by an extensive preliminary reading of the stories covering the tax cut debate, as represented in the five news outlets examined in this dissertation.

A close reading of news stories and research covering the Bush tax cuts provides one with a better understanding of the arguments made in support of and opposition to this policy proposal. With regard to those who supported the tax cuts, the main frames include: 1. The "Economic Stability" frame, which

addresses the tax cuts alongside discussion of efforts to promote economic growth and prevent further economic deterioration in a time when commentators were warning of a return to recession; 2. The tax “Relief” frame, which includes stories reporting on the tax cuts accompanied by the notion that they would provide benefits for the American public in a time of economic difficulty; and 3. The “Big Government” frame, which encompasses any references to the projected budget surplus, or to normative warnings against government as excessive in its size and scope. For opponents of the tax cuts, the frames include: 1. The alternative “Spending Priorities” frame, which is characterized by tax cut stories that address competing spending priorities, including increased spending on Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security; 2. The “Class War” frame, which depicts the Bush tax cuts as overwhelmingly biased toward the wealthy, at the expense of the majority of Americans; and 3. The “Cost” frame, which is defined by concerns over the cost of the cuts, possibly resulting deficits and debt, and concerns that the tax reductions might be overly expensive. These frames were selected because they fit well within the debates engaged in by advocates and critics of the Bush tax cuts, and related back to the points in which they choose to raise and ignore when discussing such cuts.

B. Empirical Findings

The findings herein assess media reporting in relation to the Bush years of majority Republican rule, providing evidence in favor of both the indexing and hegemonic models, although only limited evidence is also found in favor of the latter. As with Chapter 3, I analyze the results from print media first, then review the television findings, and finish with a comprehensive review of print and television op-eds and editorials. Table IX includes the findings for print coverage of major actors in story headlines, leads, and quoted sources for the 2001 tax cuts discussion in both the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. Virtually no evidence is found in support of the pluralist model, with non-state actors reaching at least one-third of all actors cited in headlines, leads, and quotes in not a single one of

the nine categories. Analyzing the data, one sees little evidence in favor of pluralist predictions, with non-state actors failing to account for at least one-third of actors across headlines, leads, and quoted sources in stories for both newspapers. Only the *Chicago Sun Times* comes close to including non-state actors as 33 percent of all sources, although it falls short by one percentage point. Non-state actors appear most often in the quoted sources category – as 19 percent of all *New York Times* quotes, and 17 percent of quotes in the *Chicago Sun Times*. Non-state voices are widely spread across many different types of actors. Business representatives cited in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*, for example, included those from General Electric, the American Council for Capital Formation, General Mills, and Banc One, and Merrill Lynch, among other organizations. The relevance of these actors seems clear in light of the targeting of many of Bush’s tax cuts toward businesses. Workers and unionists appeared about as often as business representatives across different media outlets, although labor leaders received nearly no attention across media in question. A variety of workers were cited in print stories, ranging from a homemaker and secretary to a paramedic and an accountant, among other types of workers. Journalists’ motivations for including these individuals seemed obvious, considering that Bush’s tax cuts promised significant benefits to rank-and-file workers.

TABLE IX

TAX CUTS (2001) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ¹⁶									
	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)				Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)	
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	2	4	7	16	22	32	32	35	23
Republicans	98	96	93	84	78	68	68	65	77
Business Leaders	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	4	3
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<1	0
Workers & Unionists	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	5	4
Academics	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	5
Bureaucrats	0	0	5	6	0	5	4	3	0
Citizens	0	4	0	1	3	5	4	3	5
Executive	45	96	64	63	60	51	71	33	54
Legislative	3	0	30	28	30	39	17	50	46
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Other non-state actors appearing in tax cut stories included those representing citizen groups, and academics. Citizens' groups that were consulted by journalists argued in favor of and against the Bush tax cuts. Examples of individuals from groups cited in print news included those representatives of the *Club for Growth*, *Americans for Tax Reform*, *OMBWatch* (a research group on charities), and *Citizens for*

Tax Justice, among others. Aside from exploring the advocacy campaigns of different interest groups, reporters also reviewed the findings of various research organizations. Representatives were consulted in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times* from a fairly wide spectrum of groups (ideologically speaking) such as the *Urban Institute*, the *Progressive Policy Institute*, the *Hudson Institute*, and the *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, and provided public policy analysis of the different facets of the proposed legislation.

Evidence for the liberal model was in short supply in the case of the Bush tax cuts. Democratic actors were outnumbered in print headlines, leads, and source quotes by more than twenty percentage points across all nine categories in Table IX. As a percent of all partisan sources, the Democratic sources ranged from a low of two percent to a high of 35 percent of all sources across all sources, while Republican sourcing ranged from 65 to 98 percent of all partisan sources. An initial assessment might suggest the viability of the hegemonic model in accounting for coverage of the tax cuts. Conservative-Republican dominance of print headlines, leads, and quoted sources certainly conforms to hegemonic assumptions of a “free market,” right-wing bias in the mass media. The power of this model, however, is limited by the findings from the previous chapter that conservative-Republican sources *fail* to monopolize media content in the case of the minimum wage in 1996 and 2007. A hegemonic approach predicts conservative dominance and an idealization of framing of the minimum wage as a violation of efficiently functioning “free markets.” Coverage of the minimum wage hardly conformed to this prediction. The findings from this chapter and the previous one suggest that both the hegemonic *and* liberal models fail to accurately predict reporting content across reporting of the minimum wage and the Bush tax cuts.

As with the minimum wage, media indexing consistently predicts the direction of reporting on the Bush tax cuts, while the other three models failing to account for media content. Eighteen tests of the indexing model are represented in Table IX. Across the nine categories, Republican sources overwhelm

Democratic ones by wide margins. This finding is precisely what the indexing model predicts, since conservative-Republican sources are expected to enjoy a privileged position when Republicans hold power during their unified control of government. Table IX also finds a privileging of executive over congressional sources in eight of the nine categories. In short, the president appeared to be most effective in leading the media discourse on the tax cuts, and that success no doubt greatly aided Republicans in controlling the public policy debate more generally. Furthermore, across the nine categories, state actors appear far more often than non-state actors, with government sources dominating non-government ones by more than 20 percentage points for headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Such prioritization of government sourcing is predicted by the indexing model.

1. Comparing Tax Cut Frames

Republican actors largely controlled the policy discussion over Bush's tax cuts, with the president himself exercising issue ownership in terms of controlling the parameters of the debate. This did not mean, however, that competing viewpoints and arguments were left unexplored in stories. Objectivity in the news requires an effort on the part of journalists to understand and report "both sides" of a partisan political debate taking place in Washington. Table X provides evidence that this standard of objectivity was met by those reporting on the Bush tax cuts across all the media outlets examined. While certain frames certainly appeared more often than others, and specific news outlets did at times privilege one side or another, such differences did not ensure the marginalization of liberal frames. Republican actors enjoyed a distinct advantage in the tax cut debate, although Democrats were able to at least get their basic message across in a truncated form by appearing regularly in news stories and challenging conservative arguments.

My measurements of the frames appearing in news stories provide a very general understanding of whether specific arguments and schemas appear in reporting. They do not analyze the intensity of

Republican and Democratic messages, as that task is better left to an aggregate breakdown of major actors and their appearances in reporting (as reflected in Table IX and later in party leader and party mentions from Table XI). On a very basic level though, Table X indicates the continued viability of indexing, in that reporters were making a conscious effort to accurately represent the spectrum of views in Washington with regard to the Bush tax cuts (even if they did privilege Republican and conservative voices).

Table X

TAX CUTS (2001) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA¹⁷					
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>
Economic Stability	16	18	17	20	21
Relief	14	18	18	14	16
Big Government	17	14	18	16	14
Con Frames					
Spending Priorities	12	10	9	16	13
Class War	20	20	18	15	17
Cost	21	19	20	19	20

In the five media outlets reviewed, positive and negative frames expressed in defense of and opposed to the Bush tax cuts (when looking at all three frames on either side of the debate) never accounted for less than 47 percent, or more than 53 percent of frames that appeared, depending on which news outlet one examines. In other words, both liberal and conservative positions were regularly represented in news reporting on the Bush tax cuts.

The first two competing frames in this analysis disagree about what constitute acceptable goals for a responsible government. On the Republican side, the most accepted role of government in 2001 included promises to reinvigorate the economy through tax cuts; on the Democratic side, responsible government was defined by reassessing spending priorities to include a discussion of more limited tax cuts, buttressed by a reallocation of greater funds for programs like Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security at a time when growing costs were a concern among various political leaders. Across all five media outlets, the conservative “economic stability” frame appeared more often than the “alternative spending” frame. In the *New York Times*, for example, President Bush was quoted stating that “cutting marginal [tax] rates for everybody who pays taxes is a good way to help ease the pain of what may be an economic slowdown,” while Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan concluding that “having a tax cut in place may, in fact, do noticeable good” in “avert[ing] recession” and “boost[ing the] economy.”¹⁸

In contrast to the above frame, the alternative “Spending Priorities” frame depicted the Bush tax cuts as an unacceptably large burden in terms of their potential to monopolize funds that might be needed for other programs. This frame appeared less often in reporting across the news organizations examined, although it was still relatively common in reporting. Examples of this frame included Democratic Senator Tom Daschle’s position, reported in the *New York Times*, that “only after financing for Medicare, Social Security, and agriculture are secured can the nation spend on things like ‘vacations and tax cuts,” while House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt worried that “the plan was so big it would

complicate efforts to pay down the national debt and make it more difficult to safeguard programs such as Medicare and Social Security.”¹⁹

The second two competing frames address the relationship between the tax cuts and the American public. On the Republican side, the Bush cuts were promised to serve as a form of “relief” for the public during a time of economic stagnation following the 2000 “dot-com” economic bubble. President Bush was quoted on *Fox News* arguing that “my plan addresses the struggles of American families...it doesn’t tell families how to spend their money...it’s tax relief for everybody who pays taxes.”²⁰ In complete opposition to the “Relief” frame were Democratic condemnations of the tax cuts as skewed toward the rich and as an example of class war as directed by Republicans against the public. In one *Fox News* report, for example, Democratic Representative Joe Hoeffel referred to the tax cuts as “too big,” and as “giving too much benefit to the wealthy.”²¹ Across four of the five media outlets, the Democratic “Class War” frame appeared slightly more often than the Republican “Tax Relief” frame.

The third set of competing frames addressed questions of government size and the cost of the proposed tax cuts. On the Republican side, the “Big Government” frame depicted the national government as overly bloated and as too large and inefficient. As a part of this Republican portrayal, the tax cuts were seen as a vital tool for returning to the public a surplus that was unnecessarily kept from the people. The “Big Government” frame was effectively conveyed in one *CBS* story, in which President Bush was quoted declaring that the projected government surplus was unhelpful to the American public, and that the reduction of this surplus would be a boon to working Americans: “Because our government has a surplus does not mean that every American family has a surplus. We need to give their own money back, to help families manage their own account, to pay down their own personal debts.”²² This frame, as one could easily conclude, overlapped heavily with the “Tax Relief” frame, although the attacks on government as too large in size were also conceptually distinct.

On the Democratic side of the debate, the “Cost” frame portrayed the tax cuts as threatening to increase budget deficits and national debt. For example, Democratic Senator Robert Torricelli worried that “this tax cut will be followed by an increase in military spending, unsustainable new programs, and an expanding debt,” while Democratic Senator Kent Conrad warned that the cuts threatened to “put us back into deficit.”²³ Conrad expressed Democrats’ desires to “see less of a tax cut...that would provide resources for additional pay down of debt...I think the people in the United States really want to see us get this long-term debt situation under hand, and the president’s proposal doesn’t do that.”²⁴ Of course, concerns over cost also heavily overlapped with the discussion (in the second oppositional frame) of alternative spending priorities that might be difficult to meet following implementation of a large tax cut. The “Cost” frame, however, was also conceptually distinct in that it questioned the sustainability of growing national deficits and debt. In comparison, the “Cost” frame enjoyed a slight advantage over the “Big Government” frame across all five media outlets analyzed.

Summarizing the framing findings, one sees that the indexing model is again verified when assessing the competing arguments on the Bush tax cuts. Objective news routines require that journalists mention competing arguments originating from both parties. In line with norms of objectivity, the indexing model predicts that claims from Republican and Democratic parties both regularly appear in stories, even if Republican sources dominate reporting during a time of unified Republican government. All of these expectations are validated in my examination of reporting on the Bush tax cuts from 2001.

2. Partisan Leaders and Party Mentions

An indexing model predicts that the Republican Party and Republican leaders receive majority attention in reporting during periods when the Republican Party controls the executive and congress. In early to mid-2001, Republican control produced just such a result in media coverage. Table XI provides

aggregate estimates for party and party leader mentions, finding that Republican mentions overwhelmingly dominated Democratic ones by more than 20 percentage points across all five news outlets for reporting on the tax cuts debate.

TABLE XI

TAX CUTS (2001) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS²⁵		
News Outlet	Democratic (as % of all partisan mentions)	Republican (as % of all partisan mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	32	68
<i>Sun Times</i>	29	71
<i>CBS</i>	31	69
<i>MSNBC</i>	35	65
<i>Fox</i>	37	63

Bush's control of the executive and his intense preoccupation with selling Republicans' proposed tax cuts translated into an enormous advantage in pushing for a larger tax cut package. As Table IX demonstrated, executive voices were the most commonly appearing of actors across eight of nine categories analyzed for story headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Most prominent of executive voices were figures such as President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill. Other common Republican sources cited included leading members of congress in finance and budget-related committees, among those holding other major leadership positions. Although less commonly cited, common Democratic actors appearing in stories also included minority party leaders and members of budget and finance related committees. These national leaders, by virtue of their

prominent leadership positions and expertise in the policy area in question, enjoyed substantial and regular attention in reporting. This finding is what one expects under the tenets of media indexing.

The liberal media model fails to account for the fact that Republican voices were privileged in party and partisan leader mentions, as seen in Table XI. While the hegemonic model predicts Republican dominance, the model's broader applicability is called into question in light of the failure of Republicans to control the policy process across other issues, as seen in Chapter 3 and with regard to the minimum wage. Only the indexing model is able to account for patterns of coverage apparent in both the two minimum wage cases and the tax cut case.

3. Reviewing Tax Cut Commentary and Editorials

The findings from my review of editorials and op-eds covering the Bush tax cuts mirror those seen in the last chapter. The indexing model is validated, as I show through my qualitative analysis, as news outlets made a conscious choice to disseminate a variety of supportive and critical partisan opinions covering the tax cut dispute. As with Chapter 3, some evidence was also found in confirmation of the pluralist model, while there was little systematic evidence of hegemonic or liberal biases.

In 2001, cable news outlets were not characterized by the strong degree of partisanship seen in later years. As a result, an analysis of partisanship at *MSNBC* is not really feasible for the 2001 tax cuts, although *Fox News* did include a number of partisan commentators during this period. Excluding *MSNBC* and focusing exclusively on *Fox*, one sees evidence of a modest conservative bias. Two *Fox* personalities from the channel's night-time lineup, Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly, opined in favor of the Bush tax cuts. O'Reilly supported the Bush cuts, arguing that "most Americans are paying far too much to the government, as the surplus shows," while Hannity sponsored the Bush cuts as "the best thing we can do to get out of the economic hard times we've had."²⁶ Alan Colmes, Hannity's co-host, took a more

critical position, worrying that the Clinton surplus would get “eaten up by giving a tax cut.”²⁷ In sum, pundit-based commentary leaned in favor of the tax cuts by a ratio of two pundits to one.

Print news outlets expressed a multitude of positions on the tax cuts, ranging from strongly supportive to adamantly opposed. The *New York Times* printed articles from 15 op-ed writers who opposed the cuts, but just two from those who favored it. Opponents of the tax cuts included regular (weekly) op-ed columnists, economists, former government officials, and think tank representatives. These writers provided many reasons for their skepticism, including claims that the cuts unfairly and disproportionately benefitted the wealthy, were excessively large, represented an unacceptable diversion of resources from other spending priorities, were too late to help pull the U.S. out of its economic slump, that they would unacceptably increase the national debt, and that they would lead to a decline in government revenues to the point of empowering conservatives seeking to cut or eliminate altogether programs such as Social Security and Medicare.²⁸ Supporters of the Bush tax cuts were limited to one economics professor and a representative of a conservative citizens group. These defenders claimed that the cuts either were appropriate in size, or that the cuts needed to be even larger, in order to assist in promoting economic growth.²⁹

The editors of the *New York Times* were stridently critical of President Bush’s proposed tax cut plan. They questioned the spending priorities and goals that might be sacrificed following implementation of the tax cuts. They rejected Bush’s plan as a “bad fiscal idea...”

The White House projections assume that federal programs other than Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid will not expand over the next decade. That is unrealistic. Bush’s overly generous tax cut plan would wipe out virtually the entire remaining surplus. That would leave no money to help, as he promised, low-income families buy health insurance, which could cost \$600 billion over 10 years – or to add prescription drugs to Medicare.³⁰

In sum, the *New York Times'* editorial and op-ed writings were consistently liberal across the vast majority of articles, while heavily neglecting the positions of conservative tax cut advocates.

Largely the opposite pattern was found in the *Chicago Sun Times*. The paper was slightly biased in favor of Bush's tax cuts. It printed op-eds from six writers who supported the cuts, and five who opposed them. Advocates included regular op-ed columnists and a representative of a conservative think tank – the American Enterprise Institute. Reasons these writers cited for their support include: claims that societal "prosperity" can only coincide with lower taxes, the belief that the cuts would promote economic growth and help avoid recession, the notion that tax cuts help Americans by returning to them some of their own money, the philosophical belief that tax cuts are "morally superior" to "spending or debt reduction," and the libertarian notion that taxes, pejoratively speaking, are "confiscatory" in nature.³¹ Opponents of the tax cuts that appeared in the *Chicago Sun Times'* pages included regular op-ed columnists and a Democratic Congressional Representative. These op-eds overwhelmingly emphasized that the cuts were directed more to the wealthy, while distressing over the uncertainty associated with the Congressional Budget Office's projected budget surplus.³²

Editorially, the *Chicago Sun Times* sympathized with the Bush administration's justifications for the tax cuts. The paper's editors lauded Bush's "broad-based approach" to allocating the cuts, and his goal "of returning to the taxpayers some of their hard-earned dollars from the surplus." The president's strategy, they argued, was "based on principle: Bush believes in returning taxpayers' money when a surplus demonstrates that the government is taking too much. He believes in tax cuts for all who pay income taxes."³³ The *Chicago Sun Times* displayed a noticeable conservative bias in its commentary, first and foremost in its own editorials, and secondarily in a very slight pro-Bush bias in commentary. A supplemental analysis of additional news outlets examined in Chapter 3 – including the *New York Post*, *Washington Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Chicago Tribune* finds that all of these organizations also expressed strong support for the bush tax cuts.³⁴

In summary, this analysis of editorials and op-eds finds considerable diversity in opinions on the Bush tax cuts across a variety of national media. This conclusion confirms neither the liberal or hegemonic models, which predict one-dimensionally support or opposition to Bush's agenda across news outlets. The indexing model is confirmed in this examination, primarily because the views expressed in these editorials and commentary consistently fall within the bi-partisan framework of debate promulgated by Washington's political elites, and because the national media outlets – when taken as a whole, made a consistent, conscious effort to represent the full spectrum of these opinions, rather than prioritizing one part of the debate over the other.

Questions still remain with regard to the pluralist model. This review finds at least partial support for this model, with non-state actors appearing quite regularly in *New York Times* op-eds, although not in those from the *Chicago Sun Times*. Of the 19 op-ed writers appearing in the *New York Times*, seven were regular columnists, eight were non-state actors, and four were either state or former state officials. Forty-two percent of actors, then, were non-state in origin, surpassing the expectations of the pluralistic model by nine percentage points. Commentary in the *Chicago Sun Times*, however, was far less pluralistic. Just one of the nine writers in this paper was a non-state actor, translating into only 11 percent of all actors. In short, evidence of media pluralism *was* apparent in commentary on the Bush tax cuts, albeit not as consistently as was the case in my analysis of commentary on the minimum wage.

C. The Social Security Battle Heats Up

The analysis herein of President Bush's proposed Social Security reforms is informed by a careful analysis of the competing arguments at hand. These positions were expressed by political officials in the national press, and by various academics and research organizations. Discussion was influenced, first and foremost, by data from the non-partisan General Accounting Office (GAO), whose

Comptroller General David Walker announced that the program would begin running deficits by 2018 (in terms of paying out more in benefits than it takes in through revenues), and that Social Security would be unable to pay out full benefits by 2042 if no changes were made to the program.³⁵

Social Security will face increased costs due to an aging U.S. population and the explosion in retirements among the “baby boom” generation. Walker explained that the Social Security system, as set up, was “not sustainable based upon the old method of financing,” and predicted that an estimated \$3.7 trillion in unfunded liabilities would accrue by 2080. Testimony from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and Social Security Administration (SSA) projected that the current revenue for Social Security (gathered through the payroll tax) would raise enough to cover only 70 to 80 percent of promised benefits past 2042.³⁶ This shortfall could potentially be avoided, if political officials increased payroll taxes to cover the growing costs, if spending was cut in terms of promised benefits (or through raising the retirement age at which one is eligible for benefits), or if government borrowed additional funds to help meet increased costs. Not listed in Walker’s list of solutions was Bush’s proposal to introduce individual savings accounts, which Walker estimated would contribute to Social Security’s financial woes by introducing new unfunded liabilities.³⁷

Supporters and proponents of market-based Social Security reform relied upon different arguments when discussing proposals for individual savings accounts. The liberal *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* (CBPP) attacked Bush for promising that individual accounts would provide for greater financial returns, blaming him for neglecting to acknowledge the “increased risk associated with stock market investments.” *CBPP* also faulted Bush for neglecting transition costs in funding his reforms, and ignoring the social insurance benefits that accompany Social Security (as it currently exists) as a form of *collectivized* income support.³⁸ The organization criticized Bush for proposing reforms that *CBPP* claimed would lead to a reduction in benefits for retirees that could result from 1.

volatile stock market prices and individual account losses, and 2. as a result of cuts that would be made in order to offset costs of simultaneous efforts to pay for current retirees *and* establish accounts for future retirees.³⁹

Advocates of Bush's reforms centered their claims on the supposed shortcomings of the current Social Security program and the promised superiority of market-based reforms. The conservative *Heritage Foundation* warned that the government's borrowing from the Social Security surplus (in order to pay for other programs) would eventually force a radical rethinking of spending priorities: "the problem is that repaying Social Security will require trillions of dollars in tax increases and/or unprecedented cuts elsewhere in the federal budget – cuts likely to include defense, homeland security, education, and health programs."⁴⁰ The libertarian-right *CATO Institute* cautioned that the payroll tax needed to be increased in order to pay for Social Security benefits in the future, and that increased taxation would pose "a terrible burden" on future generations.⁴¹ Far more popular among conservatives were market based solutions that introduced individual investment accounts. This approach was celebrated by the *Heritage Foundation*, which promised that such accounts would provide greater financial returns across the board.⁴²

1. Social Security Reform: Bush's Policy Failure

The debate over Social Security reform was qualitatively different from all other debates in this study in that it ended with a failure for the president, whereas all others concluded with executive policy victories. Shortly after President Bush's victory in the 2004 Presidential election, he set his sights on massive reforms to Social Security. It was at this time that Bush announced that he had earned "political capital" through his electoral victory, which he planned to invest in his Social Security reform agenda.⁴³ By early February 2005, Bush made his first major announcement (in his State of the Union address) promoting the establishment of individual retirement accounts.⁴⁴ He

announced his intentions to “give workers more control over retirement savings and put Social Security on sound footing.” Bush announced: “we will always keep the promise of Social Security for our older workers...we must strengthen Social Security by allowing younger workers to save some of their taxes in a personal account – a nest egg you can call your own, and government can never take away.” These accounts, Bush promised, would provide retirees “more freedom and more control over your own life.”⁴⁵

Initial details with regard to Bush’s proposal were hazy, although his plan became clearer as the months went on. The Bush plan included an option for those under 55 years old to agree to put aside four percentage points of their payroll taxes into an individual account that would be invested in some mixture of stocks and bonds. The plan would require a high degree of government borrowing in order to pay for benefits for both current retirees and the investment accounts for future beneficiaries. Benefit cuts were also floated by Republicans during early 2005 as one of the tradeoffs associated with transferring to a private program.

Congressional Democrats quickly mobilized against the Bush administration’s reform agenda, warning of the perceived dangers of individual investment accounts. The potential risks of benefit cuts and loss of retirement funds from market investments was a powerful motivator for Democratic leaders who were concerned that the plan could cost them support among elderly constituencies and voters. Democrats were unified in opposing Bush’s reform efforts, and began organizing town hall meetings to help solidify that opposition among their constituents.⁴⁶ Labor and senior citizen based groups such as *Americans United to Protect Social Security* and the *American Association of Retired Persons* placed pressure on Democrats and Republicans to oppose Bush’s reform campaign. The public also responded negatively to Bush’s plans. Public opinion polling showed support for Bush on Social Security as declining, with aggregate support rather low for a President who claimed to enjoy overwhelming “political capital.”⁴⁷

Bush's reform agenda largely collapsed by mid-2005. His on-the-road campaign to sell the public on major changes to Social Security was failing by the spring of that year.⁴⁸ Republican division, and eventual opposition to Bush, sealed his failure in institutionalizing individual investment accounts. While Bush's proposal encountered stiff resistance in congress as early as February, 2005, such opposition had solidified even further to include members of both parties by April.⁴⁹ By mid-year, Bush's dream of transforming Social Security was effectively dead, as House Majority Whip Roy Blunt provided a list of the "priority" legislation that Republicans wanted to act upon by Memorial Day; Social Security reform was *not* on the list.

2. Another Partisan Battle

While Republicans eventually shifted to opposing Bush's plan, their initial position on the proposed reforms was far more optimistic and distinguished from that of the Democrats. This reality was recognized by the *New York Times* in early January 2005, when the newspaper reported that "President Bush [was] confronting a deep split within his own party" between two "Republican camps" arguing over "*how big* the accounts should be and whether the president should embrace cuts in benefits" [emphasis added]. Such "divisions" were overwhelmingly pragmatic, with Republicans merely disagreeing about the details regarding *how* individual accounts would move forward, rather than over *whether* they should happen at all. This mindset was radically different from later months, when Republicans were seeking to distance themselves from the president's plan altogether. Throughout much of this conflict, however, the conflict developed along classic Republican-Democratic partisan divisions, with members of the president's party strongly supporting his plan in principle, if not every specific detail, and with the opposing party strongly opposing conservative reforms from the very beginning.

A brief review of news headlines demonstrates the strong partisan battle that was apparent throughout the debate. Such headlines included: “Kennedy Warns Democrats Not to Be Republican Clones” (*New York Times*), “White House Looking for Ways to Ease [Democratic] Opposition to Social Security Overhaul” (*New York Times*), and “Bush, Dems Take Sides on Social Security Reform; And Each Warns Other it Will Suffer in 2006 Elections Because of It” (*Chicago Sun Times*), among many others.

3. Framing Social Security

Framing of the battle over Social Security was defined according to the contours of the debate taking place between intellectuals and political officials, as described above. Positive frames that supported Bush’s reform efforts included the following conservative positions: 1. The “Personalization” frame, which is characterized by any discussion in stories about Social Security of “personal” accounts, to the importance of “free markets,” or to Bush’s promise of instituting an “ownership society” within stories on Social Security reform. These phrases conformed to the Bush administration’s attempts to portray individual investment accounts as empowering individuals against “inefficient,” “big government.” 2. The “Bankruptcy” frame, which depicts the Social Security program as in fiscal crisis and in danger of being unable to pay for future benefits of retirees. 3. The “Future Generations” frame, which addresses references to preserving Social Security for America’s children, grandchildren, and future generations. Such phrasing regularly appeared in the comments of Republicans seeking to portray Social Security as in fiscal crisis and unable to meet the needs of future retirees.

Opposing frames contained commentary that rejected Bush’s and Congressional Republicans’ claims, and which fell in line with Democratic positions. These frames include: 1. The “Privatization” frame, which is diametrically opposed to the “personalization” frame in that it appropriates the more critical description of Bush’s reform as promoting “private” accounts or the “privatization” of Social Security. While the differences between discussing “private” and “personal” accounts might at first seem

arbitrary, public opinion polling demonstrated significant variations in support for reform, depending on which of these descriptors was employed. 2. The “Manufactured Crisis” frame, which challenges claims that Social Security is going bankrupt, or that there is any sort of immediate crisis in the program. 3. The “Cost” frame, which highlights the expenses involved in promoting individual accounts and the large amount of borrowing that this reform might entail.

D. Empirical Findings

The findings for my study of Social Security reform verify the indexing model, with little evidence found in support of the liberal and pluralistic models. Limited confirmation of the hegemonic model is found in that Republican and conservative voices controlled the policy debate, although this finding is called into question in light of the failure of this model to effectively predict coverage across all four issues examined thus far.

Table XII provides no confirmation of the liberal media model. Democratic-liberal sources are dwarfed by Republican-conservative ones in all nine categories covering story headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Democratic marginalization in this debate appears to a great extent to be the result of Republican control of congress, in addition to the strong presence of a Republican president who made Social Security reform his utmost domestic priority during this period. Presidential dominance is seen most starkly in Table XII, with executive actors outnumbering legislative ones in every category. At first glance, the hegemonic model appears to enjoy sufficient predictive power, in that Republican sources dominate liberal ones in all areas. This finding, again, is thrown into question because of the failure of the hegemonic model to effectively predict media content across the Social Security and tax cut debates *and* the two minimum wage debates covered in Chapter 3.

TABLE XII

SOCIAL SECURITY (2005) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ⁵⁰									
	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)				Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)	
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	4	12	14	14	12	27	33	26	20
Republicans	96	88	86	86	88	73	67	74	80
Business Leaders	0	0	0	2	2	<1	2	3	1
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	<1	0	0	0	2	1
Workers & Unionists	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1
Academics	0	0	2	2	0	<1	0	8	12
Bureaucrats	2	0	10	1	2	6	0	3	1
Citizens	0	0	0	4	5	4	4	9	6
Executive	93	94	43	63	72	55	55	37	44
Legislative	4	6	17	26	18	33	32	36	35
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	<1	0

As with the liberal media model, the pluralist model lacks power in explaining the results in the Social Security case study. Non-state actors fail to reach at least one-third of all actors across all nine categories seen in Table XII. These voices do receive modest coverage as quoted sources in both *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times* stories, although attention to them was meager throughout story headlines and leads. Even in quoted sources, labor leaders, workers, and union members are barely mentioned in stories. As such, reporting on a “working class” angle in terms of how Social Security reforms would affect American laborers is largely absent in stories. Workers and union members comprise four percent of all *MSNBC* actors appearing in story leads. Examples of workers in that outlet, however, are restricted to American Hollywood actors, in essence removing working class voices from consideration.⁵¹

Labor leaders appear in almost none of the categories from Table XII covering stories on Social Security. Business leaders similarly receive meager coverage, suggesting that the perspectives of labor and business representatives, and their positions on how Social Security reform will affect them, were not factored into journalists’ considerations. “Average” citizens and academics, however, receive comparatively more interest in news stories and across news organizations. Academics and researchers were likely consulted due to their perceived expertise in analyzing often-times complex proposals for Social Security reform. Academics generally retain a meager presence in headlines and leads, although they appeared more often as quoted sources. Researchers consulted represent universities, businesses, and think tanks, with journalists citing business professors, economists, and liberal and conservative researchers from groups such as the *Economic Policy Institute* and the *CATO Institute*, among others.⁵² Citizens appear somewhat frequently in stories, across story leads and in sources quoted by journalists. These citizens represent various citizens groups lobbying in favor or and opposed to Bush’s reforms – hence the reason for including them in stories on Social Security seems obvious.

With pluralist and liberal explanations discounted, and the hegemonic model's applicability across case studies in doubt, all that is left for consideration is media indexing. Indexing accurately predicts news content across all nine categories on Table XII, with Republican actors dominate Democratic ones by more than twenty percentage points in every analysis of headlines, leads, and quoted sources. This is to be expected during Republican control of the executive and legislature. Additionally, state actors constitute more than two-thirds of all actors appearing in all nine categories analyzed. Such extensive reliance on government sources, again, is to be expected according to the predictions of indexing. In total, then, the indexing model accurately predicts coverage across all 18 tests seen in Table XII.

1. Analyzing Social Security Frames

The results of this case study are comparable to those seen in the Bush tax cuts study. As indicated in Table XIII, one sees that journalists consciously took care to include in their reporting views that resided within the Democratic-liberal to Republican-conservative political spectrum. Depending on the media outlet in question, positive frames in defense of the Social Security reform accounted for as little as 44 percent, to as high as 60 percent of all frames that appeared. Similarly, critical frames expressed in opposition to reform accounted for as little as 42 percent to as much as 56 percent of all frames seen in stories. The indexing model predicts that neither the total positive or total negative frames appearing in reporting should account for more than 60 percent of all frames. This prediction is met across all five outlets examined. In short, media indexing accurately accounts for variations in media framing of Social Security, with reporters making a conscious effort to include both liberal and conservative points of view regularly in their reporting.

TABLE XIII

SOCIAL SECURITY (2005) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ⁵³					
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>
Personalization	22	23	23	28	23
Bankruptcy	17	9	20	18	17
Future Generations	11	12	9	11	15
Con Frames					
Privatization	29	37	31	25	22
Manufactured Crisis	10	14	11	10	15
Cost	11	5	6	7	9

Upon closer inspection of the first set of competing frames, one sees that the “Privatization” frame accounts for a greater percentage of all frames than the “Personalization” frame in three of the five outlets. *Fox News* privileges personalization slightly more than privatization, although both frames appear roughly as often on *MSNBC*. News reports concede the importance of the “personalization-privatization” dichotomy in numerous stories. The *New York Times*, for example, highlights *CATO Institute* representative Michael Tanner’s acknowledgement that phrasing mattered greatly to members of Congress: “Republicans in Congress do not like the word ‘privatization’ because it does not poll well.”⁵⁴ President Bush, the paper reported, took issue with the term “privatization,” viewing it as a “trick word” that was “intended to scare people.” Republican House Representative Jim McCrery, the Chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee tasked with addressing Social Security, created the following dichotomy with regard to the framing of individual accounts: “‘Private’ is exclusive, ‘private’ is

limiting. ‘Private’ is something that’s not available to all. ‘Personal’ is encompassing. It’s individual. It’s ownership. In the end, you need the combination of ‘personal’ and ‘security.’”⁵⁵

The second pair of rival frames addressed the financial health and soundness of Social Security. The “Bankruptcy” frame was well personified in the comments of President Bush, in which he warned American youth: “If you’re 20 years old, in your mid-twenties, and you’re beginning to work, I want you to think about a Social Security system that will be flat bust, bankrupt, unless the United States Congress has got the willingness to act now.”⁵⁶ This refrain was repeated by administration officials; Bush’s Chief of Staff Karl Rove, for example, appeared on *Fox News* predicting that “we are facing a Social Security system that is going to go bankrupt by the time our kids and grandkids retire. And we’d better do something about it.”⁵⁷ For their part, many Republican members of congress repeated claims that the system would soon be entering “crisis.”⁵⁸

Characterizations were quite different among Democrats and other critics, as they were more likely to stress the “Manufactured Crisis” frame. Witold Skwierczynski, the President of the Social Security Council of the federation of government employees, for example, argued in the *New York Times* that “some of the information being imparted” by those claiming Social Security’s bankruptcy were “not factual, not accurate. There is no immediate crisis.”⁵⁹ Reporters themselves conveyed the reality that the Social Security surplus was not predicted to run out until 2042. On the face of it, this projection seemed to call into question the claim that Social Security was suffering from an *immediate* crisis.⁶⁰ Generally speaking, the “Bankruptcy” frame appeared in news stories more often in four of the five news organizations reviewed. Only in the *Chicago Sun Times* did the “Manufactured Crisis” frame appear more often.

The third and final set of frames addressed solvency issues related to Social Security. The “Future Generations” frame was an outgrowth of the “Bankruptcy” frame, as Republicans and conservatives predicted that Social Security would be unable to meet the needs of future workers

because it was running out of money. The purveyors of the “Cost” frame suggested that the borrowing associated with creating individual accounts (while continuing to fund current retirees) was a burden on the American taxpayer and on future generations. The “Future Generations” frame, however, enjoyed a modest advantage over the “Cost” frame in four of the five news organizations examined.

Those who appropriated the “Future Generations” frame included figures such as Nicole Devinish, an assistant to President Bush, who spoke on *MSNBC* about the administration’s calls to “Democrats and Republicans to take on the big issues and the ones that really allow us to leave the government and this country in better shape for future generations. [President Bush] poses the question, what can we do to improve the state of our children and grandchildren’s Union?” Similarly, Republican Representative and Chairman of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security celebrated individual accounts as “the only way we can take care of our kids in the future” as the baby-boomer generation swells the ranks of the retired and those relying upon Social Security.⁶¹

Proponents of the “Cost” frame focused their energies on suggestions that individual accounts, as news reporting suggested, “could add up to \$2 trillion to the deficit over 10 years.”⁶² Democratic Senator and senior Budget Committee member Kent Conrad, for example, reacted to President Bush’s talk “about not wanting to pass burdens to future generations...But his budget does precisely that – passing on a crippling and growing debt to our children and grandchildren...I will not be part of the unraveling the commitment of Social Security based on gutting the benefits and hoping the stock market makes up the difference and funding the transition with borrowing.”⁶³

In summary, media indexing receives strong support in the framing tests above. It is true that Republican and conservative voices were strongly privileged over Democratic and liberal ones in media coverage of Social Security. There is clear evidence, however, that reporters sought to introduce both Republican and Democratic perspectives in stories covering this contentious policy issue.

2. Partisan Actors in Context

As with the tax cuts case study, my examination of party leaders and party mentions here finds that Republican actors overwhelm Democratic ones. News reports did not fixate on Democratic actors – a finding that is troubling for the liberal media model. The hegemonic model does predict Republican dominance of partisan mentions, seemingly validating the model in as applied to the Social Security case study. However, the strong privileging of Republicans is *not* consistently found in the case studies from Chapter 3. Media indexing, rather than the liberal media model, effectively accounts for coverage patterns across all four case studies in Chapters 3 and 4. As Table XIV suggests, Republican actors occupy the dominant position with regard to party and party leader mentions, as is expected during a time of unified Republican government.

Table XIV

SOCIAL SECURITY (2005) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS⁶⁴		
	Democratic (as % of all partisan mentions)	Republican (as % of all partisan mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	26	74
<i>Sun Times</i>	21	79
<i>CBS</i>	29	71
<i>MSNBC</i>	40	60
<i>Fox</i>	47	53

Republican actors outnumber Democratic ones in all five news organizations, although Republican mentions failed to exceed Democratic mentions by more than 20 percentage points in two outlets – *Fox News* and *MSNBC*. Reporting on Social Security reform was heavily tailored to the comments of prominent leaders in the executive and legislative branches. In the executive, commonly mentioned Republicans included (most importantly) President Bush, in addition to others such as Vice President Cheney and other members of the executive branch. In congress, a number of Republicans in leadership roles were regularly mentioned, such as Senator and Chairman of the Finance Committee Charles Grassley, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, House Majority Leader Tom Delay, and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, among other prominent leaders in Congress and major committee members budget and finance related.

Although Democrats received less mentions than Republicans, the party's leaders were still the most likely to receive attention from journalists. Listed among regularly mentioned Democrats were: longtime Senator Max Baucus, Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Rahm Emanuel, and longtime Senator and progressive Edward Kennedy, among others holding official leadership positions or sitting on major committees. That these individuals regularly appeared in news reporting suggests that journalists were looking to them to set the agenda for Democratic talking points. Their senior positions in the party are further evidence of the media indexing effect, whereby the mass media rely upon high level government officials in their reporting.

3. Editorials and Commentary on Social Security Reform

As with the tax cut debate, Social Security reform was not characterized by a consistent hegemonic or liberal bias. Opinions in commentaries were indexed to cover views ranging from conservative support for Bush's individual accounts to liberal challenges to the Republican reform agenda. By 2005, *MSNBC* was only just beginning to appeal to partisan news audiences. *MSNBC's*

conservative *Tucker* program was not yet running until after the Social Security debate had already culminated. However, another partisan program, *Countdown* with Keith Olbermann, was aired at the time. Olbermann is a well-known liberal, and his position on Social Security was antithetical to that of Bush and Congressional Republicans. Similarly to other liberals, Olbermann questioned Bush's depiction of Social Security as in a state of fiscal crisis. He pointed to Bush's past warning (made in 1978) that the program would be bankrupt by 1988 as evidence that the President was exaggerating the problem at hand.⁶⁵ In short, the little commentary that did take place on *MSNBC* leaned in a liberal, anti-Bush direction.

Fox News programming was nowhere near as partisan in 2005, when compared to a few years later. During this earlier period, there were relatively fewer conservative pundits with television programs at *Fox*. However, commentary still did lean in a conservative, pro-Bush direction in the case of Social Security. Bill O'Reilly accepted the notion that the Social Security program was in crisis, and he approved of Bush's plan due to its voluntary nature, which the host felt provided Americans with additional choice in terms of planning for their retirement.⁶⁶ As usual, the Hannity and Colmes program displayed a dichotomy between conservative and liberal positions. Hannity discussed Bush's private accounts proposal as a means of "saving" Social Security "for future generations," while Colmes distressed over the costs of Bush's proposed reforms, which he warned could reach \$2 trillion.⁶⁷ Contrary to *MSNBC*, then, *Fox News* leaned in a more conservative direction on Social Security reform.

The *New York Times* displayed a noticeable liberal, anti-reform bias, running op-eds from nine writers who opposed Bush and from four writers in favor. Counted among opponents of the Bush-Republican plan were regular (weekly) liberal op-ed writers, business representatives, a variety of professors from different disciplines, former government officials, and representatives of think tanks. Reasoning for opposing Bush's proposed reforms included: claims that Bush was exaggerating the

problem with regard to Social Security's financial state, the belief that Social Security, as it existed at the time of the debate, was tremendously successful in providing security for the retired, the notion that individual retirement accounts should be promoted *in addition to* the current system of benefits, rather than as a replacement of it, concerns over possible investment losses from individual accounts due to fluctuations in the stock market, anxiety over potential benefit losses for women and children under proposed Republican program revisions, condemnations of Bush as committed to destroying Social Security, rather than saving it, and criticisms of the borrowing costs associated with covering current retirement benefits while also paying for future investment accounts.⁶⁸

The *New York Times* privileged opposition to reform, but it did make room for the views of Bush supporters. Supportive op-ed writers included regular (weekly) columnists and a representative of the Brookings Institution. Justifications for reform were mainly focused on claims that individual retirement accounts would increase retirees' savings, and thereby aide in fighting poverty.⁶⁹

In its editorials, the *New York Times* was scathing in its condemnations of President Bush. Aside from criticizing the borrowing that would be required to pay for Bush's retirement accounts, the paper's editors also charged the administration with "manipulating information."⁷⁰ This claim related specifically back to the administration's claim that government borrowing of \$2 trillion to establish private accounts would help avoid \$10 trillion in unfunded program liabilities in the future. Countering Bush, the *New York Times* argued that the "\$10 trillion is a highly inflated figure, intended to overstate a problem that is reasonable estimated at \$3.7 trillion or even considerably less. Worse are the true dimensions of the administration's proposed ploy, which were made painfully clear in a[n Executive] memo," which estimated, counter to the administration's public claims, that even with \$2 trillion in borrowing, a privatized system would be unable to pay benefits without large cuts.⁷¹ This concession, the *New York Times* editors lamented, ran counter to conservative promises that the introduction of

individual accounts would enhance, rather than reduce benefits – hence it was interpreted as an indication of Republican dishonesty and manipulation.

The *Chicago Sun Times* also leaned slightly against Social Security reform, although far less so than the *New York Times*. The paper ran op-eds from six writers who opposed the Bush plan, and from four writers who were supportive. Among the ranks of the opponents were civil regular columnists, a government official, and a representative of the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability. Their reasons for opposing reform included: attacks on Bush for raiding the Social Security surplus to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy, criticisms of Republicans as increasing the deficit and debt through borrowing for individual investment accounts, and attacks on alleged Bush administration manipulation and misinformation.⁷² The final point was seen most clearly in columnist William O'Rourke's criticism of supposed Social Security doubletalk, with Republicans relying on low economic growth estimates when predicting shortfalls in Social Security's future revenues, but relying on higher end estimates when projecting benefits to be produced from the creation of individual retirement accounts.

Supporters of Bush's reform proposal were limited to regular columnists for the *Chicago Sun Times*. Justifications for support included: claims that individual accounts would empower individuals to increase their savings and wealth, congratulations directed at Bush for being willing to make the "gutsy" decisions allegedly needed to sustain Social Security into the future, and adulation over the introduction of market "competition" into Social Security, as opposed to relying on a "government monopoly" that controls current benefits.⁷³

Editorially, the *Chicago Sun Times* took neither a positive nor negative stance toward the Bush administration's proposed Social Security plan. On the one hand, Bush's accounts were seen as an "investment" in the future of retirees. On the other hand, the paper also worried about the borrowing costs associated with the plan, and about whether the fiscal problems facing Social Security had been exaggerated.⁷⁴ In summary, the *Chicago Sun Times* coverage was fairly balanced, albeit somewhat

liberal, in that it slightly privileged opposition to Bush, while seeking to straddle the line between Democratic and Republican positions on reform. A supplemental analysis of additional newspapers discussed in the last chapter (the *New York Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*) finds that conservative positions were taken by the editors of all of these papers. These editorials either supported individual accounts in principle, or echoed the Bush administration's claim that Social Security was going bankrupt, while applauding him for addressing the issue in the way he did.⁷⁵

National editorials and commentary on Social Security conformed to the predictions of indexing, with the range of content being determined by officials in Washington. And while hegemonic and liberal voices failed to dominate commentary across all the outlets examined, limited confirmation does exist in support of the pluralist model. As with my analysis of the Bush tax cuts, I find evidence of a substantial presence for non-state actors in one of the two newspapers – the *New York Times*. In that newspaper, five of 13 op-ed writers were non-state actors, translating to 38 percent of the total. The number was significantly less for the *Chicago Sun Times*, in which two of 10, or just 20 percent of op-ed writers were non-state actors. The finding from the *New York Times* exceeds the threshold established in this dissertation, which expects non-state actors to comprise at least one-third of all sources for coverage to be pluralistic.

E. Conclusion

When taken together, the results from this chapter and the last presented little evidence of any systemic liberal or hegemonic bias in reporting. A limited pluralist bias was found, but only in newspaper op-eds, and that bias was not seen consistently across the media outlets examined. In short, the pluralist, liberal, and hegemonic models are lacking in explanatory and predictive power. Media indexing, on the other hand, is incredibly effective in predicting content. Reviewing both the tax cuts

and Social Security case studies, one sees that the indexing model accurately predicts news coverage in 54 of 56 tests, or 96 percent of the time. Editorials and commentary are also indexed to the opinions expressed by political officials, which effectively drive the media debate on issues such as the minimum wage, tax cuts, and Social Security. In the next chapter, I extend my analysis of media content to two policy issues – regulation of executive pay and the 2009 stimulus – that took place under unified Democratic government.

Notes

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¹⁷ For Table 4.2, inter-coder reliability tests were undertaken for my coding and that of the two supplemental coders – more specifically for individual measurements covering liberal and conservative story frames. For story frames, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was 94% and 91% for the *New York Times*; 97% and 91% for the *Chicago Sun Times*, and 100% and 94% for *CBS*, 97% and 100% for *MSNBC*, and 95% and 100% for *Fox News*.

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⁶² Associated Press, “Democrats Assail Bush Budget, Deficit,” *USA Today*, 5 March 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-03-05-dem-budget_x.htm

⁶³ David E. Rosenbaum and Richard W. Stevenson, “6 Key Democratic Senators Oppose Bush Plan on Benefits,” *New York Times*, 1 February 2005, 14(A).

⁶⁴ Inter-coder reliability tests were not needed for my examination of party and party leader mentions. For more on this, see Endnote 51 from Chapter 3.

⁶⁵ Keith Olbermann, “Countdown,” MSNBC, 3 February 2005, 7 PM EST; Keith Olbermann, “Countdown,” *MSNBC*, 21 January 2005, 7 PM EST.

⁶⁶ Bill O’Reilly, “The O’Reilly Factor,” *Fox News*, 3 February 2005, 8 PM EST; Bill O’Reilly, “The O’Reilly Factor,” *Fox News*, 10 March 2005, 8 PM EST.

⁶⁷ Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, “Discussion with House Majority Leader Tom DeLay,” *Fox News*, 2 February 2005, 11 PM EST.

⁶⁸ Paul Krugman, “Stopping the Bum’s Rush,” *New York Times*, 4 January 2005, 19(A); Gene Sperling, “No Pain, No Savings,” *New York Times*, 5 January 2005, 23(A); Barry Schwartz, “Choose and Lose,” *New York Times*, 5 January 2005, 23(A); Michael C. Laracy, “Women and Children First,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2005, 15(A); Paul O’Neill, “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” *New York Times*, 16 January 2005, 11(D); Jeff Shesol, “Let’s Put This Speech to Bed,” *New York Times*, 2 February 2005, 21(A); Maureen Dowd, “Inherit the Windbags,” *New York Times*, 3 February 2005, 27(A); Bob Herbert, “The Era of Exploitation,” *New York Times*, 25 March 2005, 17(A); Robert E. Rubin, “Attention: Deficit Disorder,” *New York Times*, 13 May 2005, 23(A).

⁶⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Social Security Poker: It’s Time for Liberals to Ante Up,” *New York Times*, 5 February 2005, 17(A); John Tierney, “Bush as Robin Hood,” *New York Times*, 30 April 2005, 13(A); Martin Mayer, “Private Accounts, Public Accountability,” *New York Times*, 22 April 2005, 23(A); John Tierney, “The Proof’s in the Pension,” *New York Times*, 26 April 2005, 19(A); David Brooks, “Calling Democrat’s Bluff,” *New York Times*, 8 May 2005, 13(A).

⁷⁰ Editorial, “For the Record on Social Security,” *New York Times*, 10 January 2005, 18(A); Editorial, “Read the Fine Print,” *New York Times*, 6 February 2005, 12(D).

⁷¹ Editorial, “For the Record on Social Security,” 2005.

⁷² Jesse Jackson, “U.S. Policy abandons King’s Dream; King Realized the freedom Symphony had Many Movements,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 18 January 2005, 35; William O’Rourke, “Social Security Plan an Ideological Crusade; Privatizers Don’t Want a Solution, They Want a Victory,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 13 February 2005, 46; William O’Rourke, “Reporting Isn’t What it Used to be; Dan Rather has Come a Long Way From His Early Days of Actual Reporting,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 23 January 2005, 37; William O’Rourke, “Social Security Plan an Ideological Crusade; Privatizers Don’t Want a Solution, They Want a Victory,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 13 February 2005, 46; Cindy Richards, “Deficits Matter Because the National Debt Matters,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 16 February 2005, 51; Andrew Greeley, “How Long Can Bush Get Away with Lies? As Long as Karl Rove and His Team of Spinners Provide Persuasive Rationalizations,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 25 February 2005, 57; Ralph Martire, “It Would Worsen the Nation’s Debt and Cost Significantly More than Current Policy,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 26 March 2005, 23; Rahm Emanuel, “Low Savings Rate is Real Retirement Crisis; Day-to-day Living Expenses Continue to Rob the Middle Class of its Ability to Save for Retirement,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 22 April 2005, 49.

⁷³ Michael Barone, “Social Security Reform Can Pass Despite Clinton Failure; The Bush Plan is Much Better Policy and More Salable. The Clinton Health Care Plan Took on Too Much,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 4 January 2005, 35; George Will, “Social Security Should be Reformed not Because There is a Crisis but Because There is an

Opportunity,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 20 January 2005, 43; Betsy Hart, “Bush Must Stand Firm on Social Security Private Accounts; bush has Laid out a Bold Agenda, Now he Must Fight for it, Even Against Members of his Own Party,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 13 February 2005, 46; Robert Novak, “GOP Catches Heat on Bush Plan; For Many, the Social Security Bill is Looking Like a Bridge Too Far,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 3 March 2005, 29.

⁷⁴ Editorial, “Is Bush’s Social Security Shift as Necessary as Reagan’s?” *Chicago Sun Times*, 3 February 2005, 27.

⁷⁵ Editorial, “A System Doomed,” *New York Post*, 6 February 2005, 26; Editorial, “The Solvency Trap,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 May 2005, 18(A); Editorial, “A Forceful Address to the World,” *Washington Times*, 4 February 2005, 18(A); Editorial, “Third Rail Politics,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 September 2010, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-09-27/news/ct-edit-tenth-20100927_1_dold-and-seals-private-accounts-social-security

VI. UNIFIED DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT: THE STIMULUS AND EXECUTIVE PAY, 2009

On the Stimulus:

Barack Obama, President of the United States

- "The jobs we create will be in business large and small across a wide range of industries. And they'll be the kind of jobs that lead the world in the long term."¹ February 2009

John Boehner, House Republican Minority Leader

- "The flawed bill the president will sign today is a missed opportunity, one for which our children and grandchildren will pay a hefty price."² January 2009

On Executive Pay:

Barack Obama, on the taxpayer-funded executive bonuses at AIG

- "This is a corporation that finds itself in financial distress due to recklessness and greed...how do they justify this outrage to the taxpayers who are keeping the company afloat?"³ March 2009

Senator Mel Martinez, Senate Republican, on government regulation of executive pay

- "What executives have done [in granting taxpayer funded bonuses] is troubling, but it's equally troubling to have government telling shareholders how much they can pay the executives."⁴ February 2009

Following the massive Republican losses in the 2008 election, early 2009 witnessed the rise of unified Democratic control of congress and the White House. In a time of economic crisis and recession, the Democratic Party made corporate governance issues and economic growth into cornerstones of its public policy agenda. Unsurprisingly, partisan debate was strong at the time, as Republicans were seeking to obstruct Democratic legislative initiatives that were seen as anathema to conservative-Republican ideology. National political debates over the proposed Democratic stimulus and the regulation of corporate executive pay on Wall Street dominated public discourse during this period. Early and mid-2009 saw the emergence of competing liberal and conservative positions with regard to

the legitimacy of regulating corporate America, and the proper role of the national government as related to economic stability and growth, job creation, and public debt. These disputes are well encapsulated in the quotes provided at the beginning of this chapter.

In this chapter, I assess mass media coverage of the stimulus and executive pay, examining them as case studies under unified Democratic government. As with Chapters 3 and 4, I test the competing liberal, hegemonic, pluralist, and indexing models, analyzing story headlines, leads, quoted sources, competing frames, partisan mentions, and op-ed and editorial content. I find that, as with reporting on the minimum wage, tax cuts, and Social Security, coverage is best explained according to the tenets of media indexing model, and far less so by the hegemonic, pluralist and liberal models. While evidence from this chapter also confirms the predictions of the liberal model – with Democratic actors dominating reporting – this finding is belied by data from earlier chapters, which uncovered no evidence of systematic Democratic dominance of the news whenever Democrats fail to dominate government.

A. The Stimulus Debate and the Economic Crisis

The 2000's saw the emergence of one of the largest speculative bubbles in Wall Street history. The \$8 trillion housing bubble eventually collapsed by late 2008,⁵ taking with it a number of national banks and investment firms, which were in danger of declaring bankruptcy due to the massive losses incurred through housing defaults and associated decline in the value of mortgage-related derivatives. This collapse coincided closely with the 2008 election, in which voters overwhelmingly punished the party of the president (George W. Bush), voting in Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, in addition to a Democratic president (Barack Obama). The emergence of unified Democratic government was accompanied by renewed political debate about the importance of an active government during times of economic turmoil.

The Democratic-Republican debate over the economy centered on Keynesian and Supply Side arguments with regard to the most effective ways to end the emerging economic recession, growing unemployment, declining housing values, and increasing poverty. Contrary to the Supply Side approach explained in Chapter 4, Keynesian economics is fundamentally “Demand Side,” in that it frames economic growth as stemming from the government’s attempts to stimulate consumer demand for goods and services during times of market failure and economic crisis. According to Keynesians, consumer demand is increased during times of economic uncertainty through increased government spending on programs such as public works, funded through government borrowing and deficit spending that is aimed at “stimulating” the economy. As the father of Demand Side theory, economist John Maynard Keynes advocated government intervention following economic crashes in the form of monetary policies such as the reduction of interest rates offered by the Federal Reserve, and increased government investment in infrastructure as a means of employing large numbers of Americans.⁶ Newly employed Americans were expected to allocate their earnings toward increased consumption, and as a result, increased economic growth. The 2009 stimulus package supported by Democrats was a classic example of Keynesian economics as applied to the emerging economic crisis.⁷

1. Competing Ideologies and the 2009 Stimulus

Supporters and critics of President Barack Obama’s proposed stimulus argued their claims in an informational environment that highlighted both perceived benefits and limitations of the stimulus. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that, by infusing nearly \$1 trillion into the economy, the stimulus would increase economic growth in the U.S. by between 1.2 to 3.6 percentage points in 2010. The CBO projected that from 1.3 to 3.9 million jobs would be created within the same period, with the unemployment rate being lowered by between .7 to 2.1 percentage points. GDP and employment gains would continue to be larger than if a stimulus was not passed in 2011, although the gains would be less

than those seen in 2010. However, the CBO also estimated that national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would decline by between .1 to .3 percentage points in total by 2019, after factoring in the effects of growing national debt associated with the stimulus.⁸ The CBO's May 2011 estimate concluded that the stimulus raised GDP by between 1.1 to 3.1 percentage points, decreased unemployment by between .6 to 1.8 percentage points, and increased the total number of employed by between 1.2 to 3.3 million.⁹

Liberal policy analysts took advantage of the CBO's short term estimates to make the case for the stimulus as a means of stabilizing and strengthening the economy. The *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities* argued that the stimulus would aid in "significantly ameliorating the recession's impact on poverty," as reflected in the bill's inclusion of unemployment insurance, working family tax credits, food stamps funding, and one-time payments to groups such as veterans, retirees, and to those with disabilities.¹⁰ The *Economic Policy Institute (EPI)* estimated that unemployment would have been as much as two percentage points higher by the end of 2009 if it were not for the stimulus.¹¹ *EPI* supported the stimulus as a means of improving American infrastructure, but also criticized the bill for not going far enough. The group cited a report from the American Society of Civil Engineers, which estimated that the stimulus funded just eight percent of the amount needed over five years for infrastructure development, with an additional \$1.1 trillion still needed.¹²

Conservative policy analysts either neglected or ignored the CBO and liberal groups' discussion of the positive employment and economic benefits of the stimulus. They instead focused on the debt associated with the bill, while framing government intervention as an impediment to the health and stability of the economy. The *Heritage Foundation* lambasted the stimulus as "the LARGEST SPENDING BILL EVER enacted by Congress, making the New Deal look small, accounting for inflation." *Heritage* calculated that the stimulus spending would cost each U.S. family more than \$10,000, and "would be the equivalent to what they [families] roughly spend on food, clothing, and health care in an entire year."¹³ The *American Enterprise Institute* situated the discussion of the stimulus within a larger

dialogue among conservative economists that rejected Keynesian spending as failing to contribute to significant economic growth.¹⁴ The *Competitive Enterprise Institute*, which openly champions “free markets and limited government,” classified much of the spending in the stimulus as “boondoggles” and as “wasteful union-controlled” projects which the group promised would do little to promote infrastructure development.¹⁵

2. The Political Battle

The partisan battle over the stimulus was as intense as that seen over any issue in recent years, with Congressional Republicans were nearly uniformly opposed to President Obama and Congressional Democrats’ proposal. Obama wasted no time promoting the stimulus, taking the case to the public in early January 2011, before he had even been inaugurated president.¹⁶ Obama’s early plan called for \$825 billion in spending as a means of “jolt[ing]” the economy out of recession, while Republicans expressed strong caution over the stimulus package.¹⁷ Obama indicated by late January that he was potentially open to a “compromise” on the stimulus, with a willingness to increase the tax cuts included in the bill as a means of winning support from Republicans.¹⁸

In late January 2009, House Democrats voted overwhelmingly in favor of an \$819 billion stimulus, without receiving a single Republican vote.¹⁹ The stimulus was the subject of strong opposition in the Senate as well, where Republicans called for additional tax cuts in the package, while still overwhelmingly opposing the bill.²⁰ Amidst partisan argument in the Senate, Obama continued to support the stimulus effort by speaking at various town halls and other events.²¹ A bill eventually emerged in the Senate in early February, estimated at over \$838 billion, although the final compromise between the House and Senate versions produced a deal with \$789 billion in stimulus funding.²² The Senate bill was eventually passed with overwhelming Democratic support, despite just three Republican Senators supporting it.

The final stimulus bill that was passed in the Senate and House became law on February 17, 2009, despite strong public rhetorical battles between Republicans and Democrats over the implications of the legislation.²³ Differences between the two bills that were originally passed in Congress reflected higher levels of Senate funding for health care, for energy initiatives, for a home buyers tax credit, and for cash payments to the elderly, while the House bill allocated greater funds to infrastructure, aid to low income workers, and aid to the unemployed. The eventual bill passed by Congress and signed by the president – titled the “American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009” – balanced competing spending priorities from both the House and Senate, although funding was allocated for all the areas discussed above. Despite the intensity of the partisan dispute, public support for the president remained high, as could be expected during Obama’s initial “honeymoon” period in which the public was looking to him to address the country’s economic crisis.²⁴

3. Reporting Partisan Conflict on the Stimulus

Journalists quickly recognized the incommensurability of Republican and Democratic arguments on the stimulus. While President Obama attempted to position himself as a facilitator between competing parties in an effort to win Republican votes, such an effort was largely unsuccessful in winning Republican support. Stories reported in the media outlets examined in this dissertation conveyed the strength of partisan conflict, and included: “Republicans are Resistant to Obama’s Stimulus Plan (*New York Times*),” “Democrats Set Sights on Republican Senators Who Oppose Plan” (*New York Times*); and “Hopes for Bipartisanship Hit Political Reality as GOP Votes Appear Scarce for Obama’s Stimulus (*Chicago Sun Times*),” among many others.

4. Framing the Stimulus

My analysis of the stimulus was based upon the arguments made in favor of and against the initiative, as expressed by leading think tanks, policy researchers, and by political leaders whose statements were reported upon in the mass media. Arguments in favor of the stimulus include the following: 1. The “Infrastructure” frame, which emphasizes the content of the stimulus in specific project areas as related to spending on education, energy, and construction projects covering roads, bridges, and transit. Public opinion surveys find that such spending is highly popular among the public,²⁵ so the highlighting of such projects translates into positive framing for the stimulus. 2. The “Economic Stability” frame, which portrays the stimulus as necessary in helping the economy recover. References here include discussions of efforts to stimulate the economy, discussion of attempts to help the economy stabilize and grow, and references to the economic crisis or recession. Such content, mentioned in stories on the stimulus, highlighted the gravity of the economic downturn, while portraying the federal government as in a position to lead stabilization efforts. 3. The “Main Street” frame, which emphasizes the suffering of “average” Americans in a time of crisis. This frame includes references to low income individuals, to American workers, to Main Street, to the issue of poverty, to possible state and federal layoffs and service cuts in a time of escalating budget deficits, to budget shortfalls or budget crisis, and references to unemployment. These discussions, mentioned in stories about the stimulus, help create a positive image of Democratic Party at time when it promised increased government spending would address the suffering of the public.

Three frames are analyzed that depict the stimulus within a negative light. They include the following: 1. The “Taxes” frame, which includes any references to taxes or tax cuts. The Republican Party’s fixation on tax cuts as a means of promoting economic growth has been well known for decades. Democratic efforts to include a significant number of tax cuts in the stimulus were a direct product of Republican rhetoric, which depicted Democratic proposals as wasteful spending and as ineffective in

promoting economic growth. Democrats' acceptance of the claim that tax cuts constitute an important approach to promoting growth represents a major victory for conservative and Republican framing of the stimulus debate. 2. The "Borrowing" frame, which stresses the effects of the stimulus on the national deficit and debt. Republican attacks on the stimulus for dooming future generations with unsustainable debt fit comfortably within the "Borrowing" frame, as it includes any discussion of the cost of the stimulus, to the borrowing entailed in the bill, and to government deficits and debt. Discussion of cost, in and of itself, is rather vague, which is why references have to appear in sentences in which the Republican Party or its leaders are mentioned or quoted in order to be coded as part of the "Borrowing" frame. 3. The "Big Government" frame, which encompasses discussions of government intervention as insufficient in addressing the economic crisis. This frame includes references to "big government" and "special interest" or "pork" projects. It also includes reporting of "pet" projects, in addition to challenges to those projects as ineffective in promoting economic growth. Finally, the frame includes references to government spending and stimulus as wasteful, discussion of government as bloated and irresponsible, and discussions of government spending that appear alongside references to the Republican Party and its political officials. Republican officials' discussions of "spending" related to the stimulus are overwhelmingly pejorative, as the word "spending" itself comes to be seen automatically in a negative light (for example, with references to the bill as not a "stimulus" bill, but simply a wasteful "spending" bill).

B. Empirical Findings

The findings herein assess media content in relation to the Obama years of majority Democratic rule, providing strong evidence in favor of the indexing model, and with limited support for the hegemonic, pluralist, and liberal models. Coverage did lean heavily toward the Democrats, as predicted by the liberal model. This finding, however, can just as easily be explained according to the media

indexing assumptions as a function of the Democratic Party's unified control of government. In fact, this explanation is validated throughout Chapters 3 through 5, suggesting that the liberal model has little explanatory power for generalizing about media coverage across many issues and different forms of partisan control of government. As with Chapters 3 and 4, I analyze the results from print media first, then review the television findings, and finish with a comprehensive review of print and television commentary.

Table XV includes the findings for print coverage of major actors in story headlines, leads, and quoted sources for the 2009 stimulus discussion in both the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. Virtually no evidence is found in support of the pluralist model, with non-state actors reaching at least one-third of all actors cited in headlines, leads, and quotes in not a single one of the nine categories. Non-state actors fail to constitute at least one-third of all actors in every one of the nine categories, including story headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Non-state actors reach a high of 17 percent of all actors for quoted sources in the *New York Times*, although these actors appear far less often as a percent of all actors in the other categories. Business sources are fairly infrequent in their appearances in print news stories. They appear only among quoted sources in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*, and in the leads of *Fox News* stories. Examples of business sources include representatives of groups like the National Retail Federation, the Alliance for American Manufacturing, the Caterpillar Corporation, and Google Inc., among others. Business coalitions and corporations were consulted with regard to their opinions of the effectiveness of the stimulus, as Obama specifically approached major business leaders to solicit their perspectives.²⁶ Corporations like Caterpillar were included in the debate because of the potential impact of the stimulus on putting Americans back to work on construction projects.

TABLE XV

THE STIMULUS (2009) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ²⁷									
	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)				Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)	
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	94	100	62	78	87	64	76	63	79
Republicans	6	0	38	22	13	36	24	37	21
Business Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	4	2
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Workers & Unionists	0	0	0	3	6	0	0	1	6
Academics	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	7	4
Bureaucrats	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Citizens	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	5	0
Executive	88	80	45	70	71	60	70	37	55
Legislative	12	20	55	24	24	34	27	42	33
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

Academics benefitted from a higher presence as quoted sources in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*, although their presence was meager in other categories analyzed. Among those academics and researchers consulted were: representatives of liberal and conservative research groups such as the *Center for American Progress* and the *American Enterprise Institute*, representatives of non-partisan groups such as the *Tax Policy Center*, and economists and business analysts from private sector businesses. These individuals were consulted with regard to their opinions of the effects of the stimulus

on “average” working Americans and on the business sector, and in order to describe the state of the economy more generally.²⁸ Workers and unionists appeared somewhat more often in news stories, particularly in quoted sources and leads in the *Chicago Sun Times*. Examples of those who were cited included: workers who were influenced by state and local service cuts (who might benefit from stimulus dollars to their particular localities), employees of corporations like Caterpillar, who might be affected by increased construction projects under the stimulus, and private sector consultants providing analysis of how the stimulus would affect various industries with in which they are employed.²⁹ Finally, general citizens appeared in some news stories, but were concentrated mostly in the quoted sources appearing in the *New York Times*. Examples of individuals consulted included those from a variety of areas, including: liberal environmental group representatives sharing their opinions on stimulus energy spending, laid off Americans expressing their opinions of stimulus health care spending, and conservative political activists attacking Obama for stimulus spending.³⁰

The hegemonic model fails to predict coverage of the stimulus. Republican sources were marginalized in stories, as they were outnumbered by Democratic actors by more than 20 percentage points in every one of the nine categories for headlines, leads, and quoted sources. Technically, the liberal model is confirmed in this case study, as Democratic actors dominated the political discourse of reporting. As explained throughout the last two chapters, however, the liberal model fails to consistently predict coverage across issues such as the minimum wage, tax cuts, and Social Security. Finally, the indexing model benefits from the strongest levels of empirical support. Democratic sources were privileged in coverage of the stimulus during a time when Democrats exercised unified control of government, just as Republican sources were privileged during Republican unified control, and just as neither side fully dominated during periods of divided government. Confirming media indexing, Democratic sources monopolized coverage across all nine categories listed in Table XV. Additionally,

indexing receives support when examining state and non-state actors; as predicted, state actors constituted more than two-thirds of all actors in all nine categories in Table XV.

1. Competing Frames and the Stimulus

Analysis of the frames employed in defending and criticizing the stimulus is provided in detail in Table XVI. Evidence above found that Democratic voices were the most prevalent in coverage of the stimulus. However, in confirming the indexing model, one sees evidence below that reporters make a consistent effort to discuss competing liberal and conservative views with regard to the stimulus.

TABLE XVI

THE STIMULUS (2009) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA³¹					
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>
Infrastructure	16	20	10	15	16
Economic Stability	19	18	19	22	26
Main Street	17	20	18	12	17
Con Frames					
Taxes	19	22	22	20	18
Borrowing	11	9	16	13	7
Big Government	18	11	15	19	18

Democratic-liberal frames ranged from a low of 47 percent of all frames appearing in stimulus stories to a high of 59 percent of all frames, depending on the media organization in question. Republican frames comprised as little as 42 percent of all frames appearing in stories to as much as 53 percent of all frames.

In the first set of frames, proponents and opponents of the stimulus focus on competing claims – proponents arguing that the stimulus would provide for much needed infrastructure development and opponents claiming that such programs would unacceptably raise taxes on Americans (in the present and into the future). The “Taxes” frame, however, appears more regularly across all five news organizations than the “Infrastructure” frame. In the former frame, the Republican fixation on taxes as the primary means of promoting economic stimulus is apparent. *CBS* reported, for example, the comments of Republicans in Congress, who cited “basic philosophical differences” with Democrats, and “argued to replace spending that they called wasteful with tax cuts.” As Republican House Minority Whip Eric Cantor explained: “we want to see a stimulus bill that actually is a stimulus bill, a bill that will not only create new jobs but will help preserve those that we have.” A bill without tax cuts as its main component was not accepted as providing real “stimulus.”³²

In contrast to the “Taxes” frame, the “Infrastructure” frame discusses the stimulus as playing a positive role in promoting national development projects. For example the *New York Times* discussed Obama’s stimulus package as including “huge increases in spending on education, aid to states for Medicaid costs, temporary increases in jobless benefits, and a vast array of public works projects to create jobs.”³³ Such reporting highlighted the preferred narrative of Democrats, such as Representative Dan Lipinski, who was quoted in the *Chicago Sun Times* speaking of the importance of the stimulus for transit development as “a great way to create jobs.”³⁴ Discussion of infrastructure was considered a counterweight to suggestions that the stimulus was wasteful. For example, while *Fox News* reporter Bret Baier wondered whether the stimulus represented “the biggest pork barrel spending bill in history,”

he situated that discussion within another discussion of Obama's "\$825 billion wager that pumping money into infrastructure and job growth will get the country's economy back on solid ground."³⁵ Overall, the "Taxes" frame appears more regularly than the "Infrastructure" frame in every news outlet examined, although the advantage for conservatives seen here is negated by greater prominence for other liberal frames.

A second set of competing frames includes conflicting claims on the economy and government borrowing. The Democratic "Economic Stability" frame consistently appears in more stories than the critical government "Borrowing" frame across all five media outlets. References to the stimulus as vital in aiding a suffering economy came in many forms. In one example, Chris Matthews, the host of the *MSNBC* program "Hardball" reported on President Obama's "big bill aimed at pulling the American economy back from the abyss of depression."³⁶ Similarly, the *New York Times* cited Obama's Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's claim that "the government would have to invest much more [in a stimulus plan] before the economy revives: 'In a crisis of this magnitude, the most prudent course is the most forceful course.'"³⁷

The "Borrowing" frame seeks to redirect Americans' priorities from a discussion of the stimulus as aiding the economy to warnings that it would require unsustainable and unacceptable spending. "Debt" undertaken in the name of economic stimulus is seen as inherently harmful by Republicans. For example, Republican Representative Mike Pence argued on *CBS* that "the only thing it [the stimulus] will stimulate is more government and more debt,"³⁸ while Republican former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney warned on *Fox News* that "a lot of us feel that we can't continue to borrow more money" in order to pay to "extend jobless benefits" as part of the stimulus or any other government spending.³⁹ Across the board, the "Government Stability" frame appears more frequently in stories than does the competing "Borrowing" frame in every media outlet reviewed. This finding renders null the advantage enjoyed by the conservative side in the first set of competing frames discussed above.

The final pair of competing frames in the stimulus debate portrayed the battle in Congress as one between proponents of “Big Government” and supporters of “Main Street.” The “Big Government” frame appeared in more stories in three of the five news organizations analyzed, while the “Main Street” frame appeared in more stories in the other two news outlets. On the “Big Government” side, *CBS* reporter Bill Plante spoke of Republican attacks on Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi for including in the stimulus “pet projects that Democrats have been trying to pass for years that have nothing to do with jump-starting the our economy.”⁴⁰ On *Fox News*, host Chris Wallace reported on the Republican position that “spending” was reflexively negative, as seen in Republican Representative Eric Cantor’s attacks on “a spending bill” that was “beyond anyone’s imagination,” and Republican Senator John McCain’s conclusion that the Democrats’ proposal represented a “spending bill, not a stimulus bill.”⁴¹

Competing with the “Big Government” frame, the “Main Street” frame refocused the agenda on what government promised to do to help those suffering during the recession. In the *Chicago Sun Times*, reporting emphasized workers who were “battered by layoffs and dread of worse to come,” in addition to drawing attention to “much of the new [stimulus] spending [that] would be for victims of the recession, in the form of unemployment compensation, health care and food stamps.”⁴² On the program *Countdown*, *MSNBC* host Keith Olbermann spoke of the more than 2.5 million Americans who joined the ranks of the unemployed in 2008 and early 2009: “Republicans are betting everything now, that the unemployed and millions more Americans who worry they might soon be joining them on the unemployment lines would prefer that Congress do nothing so that they are taxed less on paychecks that they might not have for much longer.”⁴³ Neither the “Big Government” frame or the “Main Street” frame are dominant across the media outlets examined, as the former appears more often in three news outlets, with the latter appearing more often in the other two.

2. Partisan Mentions

A review of party leader and party mentions finds that Democratic actors enjoyed an advantage over Republican ones. Reporting does not strongly emphasize Republican officials, as the hegemonic model assumes. The liberal model does predict Democratic dominance, although such a pattern is not consistently found across the case studies from the last two chapters. Instead, media indexing emerges again as the most capable in accurately predicting reporting, although the findings here are not quite as powerful as those in Chapters 3 and 4. As Table XVII suggests, Democrats did enjoy the privileged position with regard to party and party leader mentions, as expected during a time of unified Democratic government. Democratic Party and party leader mentions outnumber Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points in three of the five news organizations. Of the other two outlets, Republican mentions outnumber Democratic ones on *MSNBC*, while Democratic mentions are more common on *Fox News*, although they fail to dominate by more than 20 percentage points.

TABLE XVII

THE STIMULUS (2009) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS⁴⁴		
	Democratic (as % of all partisan mentions)	Republican (as % of all partisan mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	61	39
<i>Sun Times</i>	73	27
<i>CBS</i>	54	46
<i>MSNBC</i>	47	53
<i>Fox</i>	63	37

Reporting tended to focus heavily on the most prominent party leaders. For the executive branch, commonly mentioned representatives include Democratic President Barack Obama, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, and economic advisor Lawrence Summers, among others working under Obama. Among the most mentioned Democratic Congressional leaders included Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, in addition to others holding key leadership and financially-related committee positions. Republicans were mentioned far less often in reporting. When they did appear in reporting, however, party leaders received most attention. Regularly appearing officials included House Minority Leader John Boehner and second ranking Senate Republican John Kyl, in addition to leading budget and financially-related committee members and others holding major leadership positions.

3. Editorials and Commentary on the Stimulus

As with my analyses from Chapters 3 and 4, editorializing and op-ed commentary on the stimulus is indexed to the range of views expressed in Washington D.C. Some news outlets lean in a more liberal direction in support of the stimulus, while others take conservative positions in opposition. Whatever the bias of individual news organizations, there is little evidence of a systematic liberal or hegemonic bias. My analysis finds that those outlets often thought of as liberal – including the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and *MSNBC* – display a clear disposition in favor of the stimulus. In contrast, news organizations commonly referred to as more conservative – including *Fox News* and other supplemental sources included throughout this study – appropriate a more critical, conservative tone.

As the national “paper of record,” the *New York Times* printed op-eds from nine writers who were in favor of the stimulus, and from five writers who were opposed from January through late May 2009. Supporters included regular columnists, in addition to government officials, liberal activists, and representatives of liberal think tanks. These op-eds provided various reasons for their support, arguing

about the stimulus along Keynesian lines that it was an effective means of subsidizing Middle America and the poor during a time of crisis; that it was a more efficient in promoting mass prosperity and stimulating the economy in comparison to “trickle down” Republican policies such as tax cuts; that the stimulus was necessary to create jobs, that it would fulfill a necessary role in investing in infrastructure, energy efficiency, and environmental conservation, that it represents a more viable alternative than the “do-nothing” Republican approach, and that the stimulus would greatly aid states in filling their budget shortfalls.⁴⁵ All such positions were quite liberal in orientation.

Just five op-ed writers in the *New York Times* were opposed to the stimulus. Opponents were drawn from the ranks of academia and think tanks. Their justifications for opposing the stimulus include claims: that the stimulus supporters had no vision; that their plan was wasteful; that it would create too much government debt; that the initiative would not succeed in stimulating the economy, and that it failed to require reforms in already existing social programs that might improve the effectiveness of those programs.⁴⁶ Such positions are quite conservative in orientation.

In general, the editors of the *New York Times* were strongly supportive of the stimulus, although they presented some criticisms of specific aspects of the initiative. They celebrated the sections of the stimulus – such as its funding for food stamps, aid to states, and aid to the unemployed, as “the most effective” way to promote stimulus, as these programs “get money directly to low and middle income Americans, who are likely to spend it quickly, boosting [consumer] demand.” “Concern over swelling deficits” was seen as all the more reason that “to get the most from every dollar that is spent on the stimulus. That means spending less money for tax cuts for business and high income Americans, and more for government programs like, say, unemployment relief and aid to states.”⁴⁷ In short, the editors at the *New York Times* were strongly supportive of the stimulus, although they wished that it was *even more* progressive in terms of allocating aid to the poor and needy, and diverting funds away from wealthier individuals.

Commentary in the *Chicago Sun Times* also leans in favor of the Democrats' stimulus. The paper printed columns from six writers who favored the initiative, compared to just two who were opposed. Supporters hailed from academia, and from think tanks and other advocacy groups, as well as including regular columnists and government officials. These writers provided a variety of reasons for their support, including claims that the stimulus would help fight poverty and stimulate the economy, that it would provide needed tax credits to individuals and businesses, and that it was part of an effort to "sav[e] capitalism from its excesses."⁴⁸ Opposition in the *Chicago Sun Times* is evident in the commentary of two regular columnists. Criticisms of the stimulus framed the initiative as creating excessive national debt, as ineffective in stimulating the economy, and as being pushed through with a "false sense of urgency" with regard to the state of the economy.⁴⁹

Editorially, the *Chicago Sun Times* displayed a level of support for the stimulus similar to that expressed in the *New York Times*. The paper criticized Republicans for not having "proposed a better idea" for stimulating the economy, while supporting President Obama for "slamming down the gate" in opposing further compromises. "A stimulus package heavy on spending and infrastructure investments is the best way to pull this country out of the deepest recession in a generation. That's a nonnegotiable for the president, even at the risk of undermining bipartisanship."⁵⁰ The strong editorial support from the *Chicago Sun Times* and *New York Times* might be taken to suggest that the mass media were strongly biased in favor of the stimulus. Generalizing about national media coverage, however, is not possible from such a small sample of newspapers. A brief sampling of supplemental sources – including the *New York Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* – finds a greater diversity of views, with all these sources having taken conservative leaning, critical positions on the stimulus in their editorials.⁵¹ In short, editorial commentary in the U.S. print media made room for a range of conservative and liberal positions.

Evidence of media pluralism is strong in op-eds appearing in the *Chicago Sun times* and *New York Times*. In the *Chicago Sun Times*, four of eight – or half of the op-ed writers – were non-governmental figures. Similarly, five of 13 writers – or 38 percent – were non-state actors in *New York Times* op-eds. The frequency of non-state actors in both outlets exceeds the 33 percent threshold established in this study. In sum, while there was no evidence of media pluralism in the content analysis of news coverage of the stimulus, there was room for pluralism in op-ed commentary.

By 2009, evidence for the emergence of a partisan news media system was more clearly evident. Television outlets such as *MSNBC* and *Fox* demonstrated that media providers were seeking to “narrowcast” to liberal and conservative viewers, in addition to providing basic news services to their audiences. This review finds that coverage of the stimulus on *MSNBC* and *Fox* conforms to the range of ideological viewpoints expressed within the political system – with *MSNBC* sympathizing with the Democrats and *Fox News* supporting Republican positions. This finding should not be taken to suggest that both outlets were uniformly liberal and conservative in their content. My content analyses above find that *Fox News* and *MSNBC* coverage, on the whole, were very similar to other non-partisan sources. This is likely due to the many news programs on both outlets, that focus more heavily on reporting stories and events than on placing a partisan slant on every issue discussed (as do nighttime punditry-based shows on both channels). Commentary in the two outlets, however, did clearly fit a partisan pattern when examining nighttime punditry programs.

At *MSNBC*, night-time hosts Rachel Maddow, Ed Schulz, and Keith Olbermann stood strongly behind President Obama in their support for the stimulus. Maddow supportively cited the warnings of liberal *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman that a failure to quickly pass a stimulus could lead to further economic collapse, with a delayed Congressional response merely slowing the speed of the decline.⁵² Olbermann spoke sympathetically of President Obama’s “vision” to “revive the economy” by “improving the crumbling bridges, the highways and the mass transit of the country.”⁵³ Finally, Ed

Schulz framed the stimulus as part of a “reinvesting in America” that “is going to save a lot of jobs in education” and is would succeed in “getting people to work” via infrastructure projects.⁵⁴

Portrayals of nighttime pundits on *Fox News* were the mirror opposite of those seen on *MSNBC*. Bill O’Reilly condemned the government for unwisely spending taxpayer dollars on programs such as food stamps, child care, and “other entitlements that have nothing to do with stimulating the economy,” and complained that Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was attempting to “stimulate the nanny state” rather than the economy.⁵⁵ Glenn Beck seconded O’Reilly’s claim that “this package isn’t meant to stimulate the economy,” reframing the stimulus as an effort to “reshape.”⁵⁶ Sean Hannity warned of the prospects of “\$1 trillion deficits for years to come,” and worried that the stimulus might “make the problem worse” by increasing individuals’ reliance on government and reducing their self-reliance.⁵⁷ Of all the evening commentators on *Fox*, only Alan Colmes expressed support for the stimulus, lauding Obama’s efforts to extend the tax cuts for Americans that were passed under President Bush.⁵⁸ Colmes’ exit from *Fox News* in 2009 contributed to the network’s evening lineup moving even further to the right in terms of its political commentary.

In my aggregate findings for this content analysis, the indexing model consistently predicts coverage more effectively than competing explanations. In 26 of 28 tests – or 93 percent of the time – indexing accurately forecasts reporting on the 2009 stimulus. The pluralist and hegemonic models accurately predict reporting in none of the tests that are run. The liberal model accurately predicts reporting in 12 of 14 tests, although the model’s effectiveness is misleading, since it fails to predict coverage with any accuracy in the other case studies in this dissertation outside of those found in this chapter. Analysis of editorials and op-eds also found a wide range of views that were indexed to those expressed by political officials from both parties. In short, media outlets examined were neither consistently liberal nor hegemonic in their opinions, although there is also evidence of media pluralism on op-ed pages.

C. Regulating Executive Pay

The dispute over the use of taxpayer funds to pay bonuses to Wall Street executives received extensive attention in the news during the first half of 2009. Late 2008 saw the emergence of the national economic crisis, which was greeted by political officials with the passage of the “Troubled Assets Relief Program.” The initiative, commonly referred to as the bank “bailout,” was supposed to provide banks with the liquidity necessary to meet their debt obligations without having to declare bankruptcy, and provide the funds needed to jump-start bank lending to other banks, businesses, and individuals. The revelation that billions of dollars in taxpayer TARP money was allocated toward bonuses for executives at failing banks sent ripples through the Washington political establishment and among the American people. At a time of economic instability, bank collapse, and increasing poverty and unemployment, the granting of bonuses to executives at failing banks and investment firms was seen as an unacceptable appropriation of taxpayer dollars by the majority of Americans. *USA Today-Gallup Polling*, for example, found that 80 percent of respondents were “dissatisfied” with “the way AIG management” handled the granting of bonuses with taxpayer funds.⁵⁹

Critical public attention to the executive bonus issue appeared at a time when scrutiny of government was increasing. A study by the New York State Comptroller’s office found that Wall Street executives allocated \$18.4 billion in bonuses during 2008. That spending constituted the sixth largest spending for bonuses in Wall Street history.⁶⁰ A proposal put forward by Congressional Democrats and President Obama to regulate executive pay at companies receiving TARP funds would cost Wall Street employees \$10.9 billion over ten years, as estimated by the Congressional Budget Office.⁶¹ The curtailment of bonuses, then, represented a serious concern for executives who would see their salaries limited by billions of dollars.

Intense ideological conflict transpired over the regulation of executive bonuses. Conservative and libertarian research organizations made strong public appeals against regulation. The *CATO*

Institute argued that the drive to regulate pay was based on the misperception that “the market for executives is not competitive and that pay levels do not reflect supply and demand for talent.” *CATO* celebrated the alleged move on Wall Street toward “substantial pressure on executive pay practices” as seen in “increasingly aggressive share-holder scrutiny” and fluctuations in year to year executive pay which “depend on company performance.” Such factors, *CATO* argued, would allow Wall Street firms and banks to “self-regulate over time.” Arguing against the regulation of executive pay, *CATO* summarized their study of “low-performing companies,” which found “a 23 percent decline in their paid annual incentives” compared to “CEOs of high performing companies [which] enjoyed a 22 percent increase” in pay.⁶²

The *Heritage Foundation* strongly supported the executive compensation system under the assumption that risk (as associated with bank investing) provides an incentive to rein in reckless speculation and investments. Opposing regulation of pay *and* bailouts, *Heritage* advocated a “free market” approach in which “government meddling” in the private economy was seen as “hopeless impractical” and as an impediment of business freedom and success. Government regulations, *Heritage* argued, “undermine incentives for performance and economic growth,” while deterring “the best corporate talent” from working at companies covered by pay regulation. In one specific attack, *Heritage* criticized a Treasury Department proposal to prohibit TARP recipients from distributing stock options to employees, as such stock options were presented as “actually reduc[ing] risk rather than increase[ing] it.”⁶³

Criticisms of the executive pay structure on Wall Street appeared prior to, and following the 2008 economic crisis. In one study by scholars from the *Center for Economic and Policy Research* and the *National Bureau of Economic Research*, higher CEO compensation levels for executives dealing in speculative investments was associated with destructive business practices. As Bolton, Scheinkman, and Xiong argued, “potentially overoptimistic investors,” aided by “optimal compensation contracts,” can

“emphasize short term stock performance, at the expense of long run fundamental value.” Fixation on short-term profit gains, they concluded, serves as an incentive for executives to pursue increasingly dangerous and destructive speculator practices.⁶⁴

Liberal citizen-research groups took a critical position on the bonuses. *Common Cause* published a list of pay packages from Wall Street firms receiving TARP funds, in effect spotlighting this practice for the group’s liberal constituents. *Public Citizen* spoke positively of government regulation of “companies that exist only because of billions of dollars of taxpayer supports” while “see[ing] fit to pay themselves obscene salaries.” The group argued that executive bonuses “helped incentivize dangerous, short term betting” and “speculative gambling” – “making it rational to bet on the housing bubble to continue to inflate, even in the face of certainty that it would eventually pop with devastating effects for financial firms.” Implementing pay regulations, *Public Citizen* claimed, would effectively impose a “systemic mechanism of accountability” on “bailout-out firms” and help address the issue of “hyper-compensation.”⁶⁵ The populist rhetoric of *Public Citizen* corresponded closely with the high levels of anger on “Main Street” amidst worsening economic conditions.

1. Democratic Reforms and the Conservative Response

The policy battle over Wall Street bonuses was in one way very different from other issues I reviewed. The Obama administration’s response to the revelation that corporate executives had been paid billions with TARP money was swift, leaving little room in the short term for deliberation in Congress. Immediately upon taking office, Obama denounced the bonuses as “shameful” and the “height of irresponsibility.” Framing himself as an opponent of excess, rather than of Wall Street altogether, Obama announced: “there will be a time for them [Wall Street executives] to make profits, and there will be time for them to get bonuses. Now is not that time. And that’s the message that I intend to send directly to them.”⁶⁶ That message was sent within the week of Obama’s comments, as he

announced plans to restrict the incomes of senior executives at companies receiving TARP funds to no more than \$500,000 a year.⁶⁷

Obama's announcement, however, did not put an end to the political debate over bonuses. The issue returned into the public dialogue as automotive corporations such as General Motors and Chrysler declared bankruptcy and appealed to the government for bailout funds. The discussion of regulating executive pay again became relevant with regards to leading representatives at these firms. The issue remained relevant in light of discussions among Democrats of *further* actions that could be taken to strengthen government regulation of executive pay on Wall Street. Such debates raged in the mass media throughout early to mid 2009, and provided Republicans and business executives a chance to respond to Democratic arguments following Obama's announcement of new pay regulations.

The Republican and business backlash against regulation began once Democrats attempted to push stronger reforms than those initially announced by President Obama. A variety of bills were presented in Congress covering reform. One proposal from Democratic Representative Claire McCaskill required a pay cap for employees of companies receiving TARP funds at \$400,000 a year - \$100,000 less than the limit announced by Obama.⁶⁸ Legislation passed in the House (by a vote of 328-93) in March 2009 would have established a 90 percent tax on the executive bonuses allocated to corporations that received more than \$5 billion in TARP money, and would have affected those executives earning more than \$250,000 a year. Another bill passed in the Senate would have imposed a 70 percent tax on bonuses, to be paid through an excise tax and a second tax on executive bonuses.⁶⁹

The Republican-Wall Street response to further regulation of pay emerged during February and March 2009. Former Bush White House Press Secretary Dana Perino defended companies like AIG – which received TARP funds but granted billions in bonuses – by speculating that “if they don't get it [the bonuses] maybe they won't be motivated enough to try to help the company turn around.” Perino ridiculed the “rhetoric in Washington” for unfairly “demonizing” executives.⁷⁰ This approach was also

pursued by Congressional Republicans, who attacked Obama, while also appropriating a populist tone by criticizing Wall Street. Such “populism” was limited however, in comparison to that seen by Democrats, in that Republicans stridently opposed any legislation that would regulate executive pay.

The below statements place Republican criticisms of regulation into better perspective:

- Republican Representative John Kyl stated that “because of their [Wall Street’s] excesses, very bad things begin to happen, like the United States government telling a company what it can pay its employees. That’s not a good thing in America.”
- Senate Republican Mel Martinez announced: “what executives have done is troubling, but it’s equally troubling to have government telling shareholders how much they can pay the executives.”
- Senate Republican James Inhofe wondered about Obama’s announced regulations, citing it as an example of “government running business”: “is this still America? Do we really tell people how to run [a business], and who to pay and how much to pay?”
- Senate Republican Bob Bennett said that regulating pay was “a leap, because the executive at the bank is a free agent who can leave the bank and go to work someplace else. [With regulation] you run the risk of having a brain drain at the bank of their top talent.”⁷¹

Wall Street firms also vigorously fought back against regulation. AIG executives cited “contractual obligations” and “talent retention” as the reasons for refusing to rescind bonuses.⁷² Seeking to preempt Democratic legislation, most all AIG employees returned the bonuses that were paid for with TARP funds.⁷³ This action effectively stalled Democratic passage of compensation reforms aimed at taxing TARP-funded bonuses. Wall Street executives’ actions were followed by Republican Congressional opposition to further Democratic action.⁷⁴ By the summer of 2009, a debate was taking shape in the House of Representatives, where Republican members of the House Finance Committee “expressed concern that the [Obama] administration was using the financial crisis to extend its grasp over the private sector.” Senior Republican committee member Spencer Bachus proclaimed that: “I strongly believe that it is neither the executive branch nor Congress’s role to mandate compensation policies.”⁷⁵

The partisan conflict over executive compensation was eventually ended in the months and year following AIG's return of taxpayer funded bonuses. By late July 2009, the *New York Times* reported that a House panel voted overwhelmingly along partisan lines to allow "shareholders the right to vote on pay and require independent directors from outside of management [to] serve on compensation committees."⁷⁶ Final legislation regulating pay did not emerge until late July 2010, in the form of the Democratic "Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act." The bill required corporations to provide a shareholder vote at least once every three years on levels of executive compensation. Shareholders were allowed through a non-binding vote to reject "golden parachute" compensation for executives, and must also be informed by their corporation of executive compensation levels as a function of the corporation's performance. In a sign of the strength of the partisan dispute, the bill passed without a single Republican vote in the House, and with just four Republican votes in the Senate.⁷⁷

2. **Framing Executive Pay**

The frames I reviewed in this analysis were drawn from the larger ideological debate taking place between policy advocates and political leaders that were addressed earlier in this chapter. Antagonistic frames portrayed government regulation of pay as undesirable and unfeasible. The first, the "Republican-Wall Street" frame, included any references to executive pay from the perspective of Republicans and business representatives. The frame was defined by any discussion of pay, compensation, or bonuses that occur alongside mentions of, or statements from Republican officials, the Republican Party, business officials – those who strongly defended Wall Street bonuses. In contrast the "Democratic Backlash" frame included any discussion of pay, compensation, or bonuses that appeared alongside mentions of, or statements from Democratic officials or the Democratic Party – voices that were overwhelmingly critical of taxpayer funded bonuses.

The next pair of frames explored executive compensation as it related to influences arising from competing government and private market forces. The “Regulatory-Reliance” frame portrayed corporate executives who received TARP funds as dependent upon the state and taxpayers – hence subject to the regulation of government. The frame included any discussion of efforts to “claw back” or force a “payback”/“repaying” of taxpayer dollars, or to regulate or impose limits on corporate pay. In contrast, the “Necessity” frame depicted corporate executives as legally required to pay the benefits. The frame was comprised of any discussion of legal contracts or legally binding contracts/pay agreements, to government as dictating pay for the private sector, to the need to recruit, retain, or reward talented executives via bonuses, to bonuses as a form of incentive that reward merit, earned achievement, or performance, and to the possible competitive disadvantages that companies might suffer under if they revoked bonuses in which employees were supposedly entitled.

The last set of frames addressed bonuses as they related to growing public and economic instability and desperation. The “Populist” frame critically examined executive pay by including references to general public outrage, anger, angst, distrust, and fury over the bonuses during a time of economic instability. Any discussion of populist furor was also included here. The competing “Economic Instability” frame also focused on volatility, but among the corporate community rather than the general public. This frame depicted strong state regulation of executive compensation as unwarranted and harmful due to its alleged negative effect on destabilizing already weakened companies during a time of crisis. It included any discussion of the ongoing problem of toxic, bad, or weak bank assets, which already posed a danger to Wall Street firms. The frame also included any references to the banking, economic, housing, or financial crises, and to government “stress tests” of the banks – all of which emphasized the already fragile situation on Wall Street prior to attempts to regulate executive pay. This fragile state of the economy was regularly emphasized by business executives, who warned that executive pay restrictions could: 1. cause a brain drain from companies

whereby they would not be able to pay to recruit talented executives; and 2. impose increased capital limits on companies, which might be pressured to payback TARP funds borrowed from government more quickly, thereby removing funds needed for further investment.

3. The Partisan Battle

News headlines demonstrated the intensity of the battle over executive pay between Democrats on the one hand, and Republicans and Wall Street firms on the other. Opposition among corporate executives was manifested in efforts to return TARP money to the government, so as to avoid pay regulations, whereas Republicans opposed Democratic-proposed regulations altogether. Some examples of news headlines emphasizing the partisan conflict included, from the *New York Times*: “Banker Bonuses are ‘Shameful,’ Obama Declares,” “Obama Plans Fast Action to Tighten Financial Rules,” “Obama Seeks to Increase Oversight of Executive Pay,” “Some Banks, Feeling Chained, Want to Return Bailout Money,” “AIG Seeking Return of Half its Bonuses,” “Battles Over Reform Plan Lie Ahead,” and “House Panel Clashes Over Pay Restrictions.” From the *Chicago Sun Times*: “Obama Lashes Out at Exorbitant Financial Sector Payouts, Calls for Responsibility and Restraint,” “Take That, AIG: 90% tax; House Drops Hammer on Bonuses Given by Bailed-Out Firms,” “Execs Return 9 of top 10 AIG Bonuses,” and “‘Outrage’ Bonuses; Firm Says it Was Contractually Obligated to Make Payouts.”⁷⁸ In short, the conflict over executive compensation was as intense a partisan battle as any examined in this dissertation.

D. Empirical Findings

The results of my content analysis of the executive compensation issue show little evidence in favor of the pluralist or hegemonic models, only limited evidence in favor of the liberal model, and strong evidence of media indexing. As with Chapters 3 and 4, I find overwhelming evidence of uniformity between the five media outlets examined in terms of content and when evaluating the competing models. Table XVIII includes the findings for print coverage of major actors in story headlines, leads, and quoted sources for the 2009 executive compensation issue for both the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times*. The hegemonic model is completely invalidated in the results, with Republican voices having failed to outnumber Democratic voices by more than 20 percentage points in every one of the nine categories. At first glance the data appear to validate the liberal model, since Democratic voices overwhelmingly control the discourse on executive pay. As repeatedly found throughout this study, however, Democratic voices fail to overwhelm Republican ones across all six issues examined, dramatically reducing the predictive power of the liberal model.

The pluralist model also receives little validation here. In only one of the nine categories is there sufficient evidence to validate the pluralist model, as seen in quoted sources in the *New York Times*. Citations from non-state actors constitute more than one-third of all sources in the *New York Times*, whereas they fail to reach this threshold in all the other eight categories, when examining actors appearing in headlines, story leads, and quoted sources. Non-state actors comprise more than 34 percent of all actors in *New York Times* quoted sources, while these actors range from a low of zero percent to a high of 27 percent of all actors for other categories analyzed.

TABLE XVIII

EXECUTIVE PAY (2009) POLITICAL ACTORS IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ⁷⁹									
	Headlines (% of stories appearing in)			Leads (% of stories appearing in)				Quoted Sources (Dems & Reps: % of stories appearing in) (Other Actors: as a % of all actors that appear)	
	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Sun Times</i>
Democrats	100	100	100	89	93	68	67	90	97
Republicans	0	0	0	11	7	32	33	10	3
Business Leaders	0	0	17	5	11	11	15	25	20
Labor Leaders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<1	0
Workers & Unionists	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	<1	2
Academics	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	6	0
Bureaucrats	0	0	0	5	5	0	3	6	0
Citizens	0	0	0	3	0	3	0	3	5
Executive	90	71	67	72	63	53	50	38	61
Legislative	10	29	17	12	16	34	32	21	10
Judiciary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Business actors were left to fill in the gap left by Republicans, who were marginalized after an overwhelming Democratic victory in the 2008 elections, and at a time when it was deeply unpopular for politicians to publicly defend Wall Street following the 2008 market collapse. Republicans had little reason to openly oppose the limited regulation of executive bonuses that were originally proposed by Obama in light of the overwhelming public anger over the issue. Democratic efforts to push for even stronger reforms did eventually provoke Republican opposition, although resistance from Wall Street to even limited Democratic initiatives was evident during the entire first half of 2009.

Business leaders and private sector economic analysts likely received such strong coverage in stories because of their relevance as beneficiaries of government and taxpayer TARP funds and as specialists in analyzing the economy. Examples of sources that appeared in stories included executive compensation lawyers, consultants, and other representatives of compensation firms, heads of hedge fund firms that were involved in mortgages and derivatives, and major representatives of banks and other investment firms.⁸⁰ Labor leaders, “average” workers, and union members were rarely consulted for or mentioned in news stories. Such actors could have been interviewed and quoted in order to better understand their opinions of the bonuses, or to explore their opinions of the growing divide between “average” employee and CEO/executive pay. Such human interest angles were overwhelmingly ignored in stories, however. Rare references to workers included, for example, a *Chicago Sun Times* story which interviewed gardener Emeline Bravo-Blackport, who “marveled at AIG executive[s]” and what she saw as their extravagant lifestyles.⁸¹

Academics and general citizens do sometimes appear in news stories, although they receive marginal coverage on par with that provided to workers, unionists, and labor leaders. Reporters made clear efforts to consult academics from across a range of ideological perspectives, with stories including comments from researchers at liberal and conservative research groups, and economists at major universities.⁸² General citizens receive very modest coverage across four of the nine categories in Table

XVIII, ranging from three to five percent of all sources. Examples of those consulted included newspaper and blog readers, a student, and a truck driver – all of whom were asked to comment on their opinions of the executive compensation controversy.⁸³

Hegemonic, liberal, and pluralist models are weak in predicting media coverage of executive pay. The indexing model is once again a powerful tool in accounting for reporting on executive compensation – even within television media with more openly partisan nighttime hosts such as *MSNBC* and *Fox News*. Democratic officials succeeded in nearly monopolizing the public discourse on executive pay, as expected in a period when the party exercised strong majority rule in congress and the White House. As displayed in Table XVIII, Democratic sources appear more than 20 percentage points more often than Republican ones in all nine categories of headlines, story leads, and quoted sources. In further accord with the indexing predictions, state actors constitute more than two-thirds of all actors in eight of the nine categories. In short, state officials (particularly Democratic ones) effectively controlled the national debate on compensation, setting the ideological parameters and setting the political agenda.

1. Competing Policy Frames and Executive Pay

Democratic officials successfully directed the national debate on compensation. However, journalists also made consistent efforts to include both Republican and Democratic views, contrary to the assumptions of the liberal and hegemonic models. Standards of balance and objectivity require reporters to accurately reflect the debates taking place in the nation's capitol, even if those debates are lopsided between the parties in periods when one party overwhelmingly controls government. In this sense, media indexing is again a useful approach to understanding media framing. Table XIX provides evidence of media outlets' consistent efforts to include both Republican and Democratic frames in reporting on executive compensation. Liberal-Democratic frames range from a low of 46 percent to a

high of 62 percent of all frames appearing in stories. Only on *CBS* do pro-Democratic frames account for more than 60 percent of all frames, while all other categories conform to the indexing prediction that reporters seek to include both Democratic and Republican perspectives in their stories. Democratic frames fail to exceed the 60 percent threshold in the four other news organizations. Republican frames count for as little as 38 percent of all frames that appeared, to a high of 56 percent of all frames. Only on *CBS* do Republican frames count for less than 40 percent of all frames included in stories. In short, even during times when Democrats dictate the national debate, reporters still undertake regular efforts to include a wide spectrum of conservative and liberal points of view.

TABLE XIX

EXECUTIVE PAY (2009) MAJOR FRAMES IN PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA ⁸⁴					
Pro Frames	<i>NY Times</i> (as % of all frames)	<i>Sun Times</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>
Democratic-Backlash	21	13	23	26	20
Regulatory-Reliance	19	15	26	18	17
Populist	13	18	13	10	13
Con Frames					
Republican-Wall Street	12	33	13	16	16
Necessity	17	13	10	21	18
Economic Instability	19	10	15	9	15

“Democratic-Backlash” and “Republican-Wall Street” frames measure the overarching state of the compensation debate with regard to how often supporters and opponents of regulation appeared in stories. In four of five news outlets reviewed in Table XIX, the “Democratic-Backlash” frame appears more often than the “Republican-Wall Street” frame. The “Pro-Regulation” frame includes discussions of regulation from the Democrats’ perspective – one that was overwhelmingly supportive of limiting executive pay. One such example was seen in the comments of Democratic Congressman Barney Frank, a prominent sponsor of regulating executive compensation. As Frank commented, “I believe the structure of compensation is flawed. Namely, we have had a system of compensation for top decision makers in which they are very well rewarded if they take a risk that pays off but suffer no penalty if they take a risk that costs the company money.”⁸⁵ Contrary to the “Democratic-Backlash” frame, the “Republican-Wall Street” frame is defined by any discussions arising from Republicans and business representatives and other employees from financial and banking firms – those who were consistently opposed to government regulation of pay. For example, Michael Melbinger, an executive compensation lawyer at Winston & Strawn was quoted in a *New York Times* story entitled “Few Ways to Recover Bonuses to Bankers,” in which the paper reported: “even if Congress rewrote the laws to demand that Wall Street firms cancel their bonuses, Melbinger said, such action might put the corporations in violation of their legally binding compensation plans.” The “Democratic Backlash” frame appeared more often than the “Republican-Wall Street” frame in four of the five media organizations. This seeming advantage, however, is nullified by the greater prominence of other conservative frames.

The second two competing frames both appear regularly in reporting, with the “State-Reliance” frame appearing more often in three of five news outlets, and the “Necessity Frame” appearing more often in two of five outlets. The “State Reliance” frame depicts corporate executives as subject to potential regulation (in terms of their pay), due to their dependence of taxpayer bailout funds. The *New York Times* reported on efforts of Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd’s effort to use “every possible

legal means” to claw back [taxpayer] money.”⁸⁶ Obama advisor Lawrence Summers promised that “every legal step possible to limit those bonuses is being taken by Secretary [Timothy] Geithner and by the Federal Reserve system.”⁸⁷

Countering the “Regulatory-Reliance” frame, the “Necessity” frame is characterized by claims that Wall Street executives are entitled to their bonuses, either because they had earned them, because they are needed to retain talented employees, or because the payments are part of legally enforceable contracts between the company and employees. The frame was well personified in the comments of AIG CEO Edward Liddy, who was quoted on *Fox News* arguing that “these [bonuses] are legal, binding obligations of AIG. There are serious legal as well as business consequences for not paying.”⁸⁸ Liddy’s perspective was echoed to a degree by a *New York Times* story, titled “Few Ways to Recover Bonuses to Bankers,” which framed “the legal means” for re-cooperating taxpayer funded bonuses as questionable. Consulting one compensation expert, the newspaper reported that “unless actual wrongdoing is uncovered at the banks – and so far prosecutors have not disclosed any – the case for clawing back past pay is weak.”⁸⁹

The final two competing frames – the “Populist” and “Economic Instability” frames – appear across numerous news stories. Both frames are fairly well balanced out, with the “Populist” frame appearing more often in two of the five news organizations analyzed, and the “Economic Instability” frame appearing more often in three of five news organizations. The “Populist” frame captures the intense anger of the American public following the 2008 “bailout” and subsequent rise in national unemployment. The frame is well encapsulated in one story from the *Chicago Sun Times* which explores public “outrage” at AIG’s bonuses, while conceding that “the financial bailout program remains politically unpopular and has been a drag on Barack Obama’s new presidency...the White House is well aware of the nation’s bailout fatigue and anger that hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars have gone to prop up financial institutions that made poor decisions, while many others who have done no wrong

pay the price.”⁹⁰ In another example, *MSNBC* political analyst Eugene Robinson referred to TARP-funded executive bonuses as “something that American workers... can relate to and can understand and can get angry about.”⁹¹

Redirecting readers’ attention to the country’s volatile economic climate, the “Economic Instability” frame depicts any regulations or burdens placed upon Wall Street as unacceptable. The instability frame is clearly visible in one *Fox News* program in which guest Mort Kondracke warned about any government restrictions placed on Wall Street as firms sought to unload their “toxic assets”:

So what they [investors] are going to do is they’ve got to rely on this public-private partnership [the TARP “bailout” and new pay regulations] in order to get private investors to buy up the toxic assets of the banks. The problem is that the private investors don’t trust [Treasury Secretary] Tim Geithner. He once promised there would not be limits on executive pay at banks. Boom, there are suddenly limits on executive bank pay.⁹²

Government plans to create a “bad bank” to help pay for “toxic assets” related to the 2008 crisis are tied directly to the issue of pay. As the *New York Times* reported, many banks refused to participate in the “bad bank” initiative if the federal government ever decided that it “might later add restrictions on their pay.”⁹³

Many other stories emphasized instability on Wall Street in order to argue against pay regulations. In one example, the *New York Times* reported on President Obama’s top economic advisors, who

adamantly opposed the pay restrictions, warning that they went too far and would cause a brain drain in the financial industry during an acute crisis. Another worry is the tougher restrictions may encourage executives to more quickly pay back the government’s investments since, in a compromise with the financial industry, banks no longer have to replace federal funds with private capital. That could remove an extra capital cushion, further reducing lending.⁹⁴

Not all stories examined make the direct connections between the weakened state of the banks and pay regulation. However, investors’ conscious choice to associate the two issues in making their argument

against pay restrictions provides a legitimate justification for including all such language within this frame.

2. Partisan Mentions

Evidence above suggests that journalists consistently attempt to report both Democratic and Republican frames, even if Democratic voices did dominate the discussion of executive pay. This finding is predicted by the indexing model. Another prediction of the model is that Democratic Party and leadership mentions outnumber Republican ones in times when Democrats exercise unified control over government. This prediction is confirmed in Table XX, which finds that Democrats are mentioned far more often than Republicans in stories on executive pay. In every news outlet analyzed, Democratic Party and leadership mentions dwarf Republican ones by more than 20 percentage points. As with reporting on the stimulus, the hegemonic model is thrown into question, as Republican sources are weakly represented in stories.

TABLE XX

EXECUTIVE PAY (2009) MENTIONS OF PARTIES AND PARTY LEADERS⁹⁵		
	Democratic (as % of all partisan mentions)	Republican (as % of all partisan mentions)
<i>NY Times</i>	81	19
<i>Sun Times</i>	88	12
<i>CBS</i>	78	22
<i>MSNBC</i>	68	32
<i>Fox</i>	75	25

Such a finding might provide comfort to those who support the liberal model, but a consistent pattern in which Democrats dominate partisan mentions is not found in this study.

As with all other cases examined, and in line with the media indexing model, prominent Democratic and Republican actors receive high levels of attention. Examples of Democrats in the executive and legislative branches that appear regularly include: President Obama, White House Economic Counsel Lawrence Summers, Senator Christopher Dodd, and Senator Barney Frank, among others. These officials obviously retained a major role in the conflict in light of the president's privileged position in policy debates, and considering the relevance of the economic counsels in providing advice for, and coordinating with the president on economic matters. Congressional Democrats appearing widely in stories were commonly cited in stories because of their senior positions on financially-related committees, and because of their ongoing efforts to present and pass legislation regulating executive compensation.

Republicans are deeply marginalized in terms of party and leadership mentions. References to the Republican Party and its leaders range from a low of 19 percent to a high of 32 percent of all party and leadership mentions. When Republicans do appear in stories, they are often those in positions of prominence. Regularly mentioned party officials included Republican House Minority Leader John Boehner, House Financial Services Committee ranking Republican Spencer Bachus, and Senate Majority Whip John Kyl, among others. The regular appearance of prominent Democratic and Republican officials is what one would expect under indexing, with journalists looking to those in leadership positions in Washington to set the parameters of the debate on issues such as executive compensation.

3. Editorials and Commentary on Executive Pay

Analysis of editorials and op-eds on executive compensation yields similar results to the earlier analysis of the stimulus. National news outlets such as *MSNBC*, the *New York Times* and *Chicago Sun Times* leaned strongly toward supporting regulation, while *Fox News* and other supplemental sources supported conservative and Republican positions in opposition to pay regulation. Evidence of indexing is found, alongside some validation of the pluralist model. Little evidence of the hegemonic or liberal models is uncovered.

In the *New York Times*, six op-eds writers expressed support for regulation during the January through May of 2009 period, as compared to just two writers who opposed it. Supporters of regulation included regular (weekly) op-ed columnists, as well as those hailing from academia and from private businesses. These writers cited many reasons for pay regulation. They argued that “bailed out executives who caused the crisis” did not deserve bonuses; that regulation was needed to prevent further “rip-offs” of the public in the future (presumably referring to another “bailout”); that Wall Street’s “culture of excess” needed to be addressed and that rewarding failure was a waste of taxpayer dollars; that the bonuses were “an insult to the basic rule of fairness”; and that regulation would serve as a means of empowering shareholders to limit executive pay.⁹⁶ The final claim is premised upon the assumption that shareholders can (and should) act to prevent future damage to Wall Street banks and investment firms that may be caused by practices that reward those engaging in high risk, high pay behavior.

Just two writers in the *New York Times* – one a regular columnist and a business representative – opposed Democrats’ efforts to regulate executive compensation. Skepticism was driven by his assumption that criticisms of executives are part of an “oligarchy” narrative that unfairly attacks Wall Street for pursuing policies that harm the country, and the assumption that “capping compensation at

bailout recipients will just make it that much harder for those boards to hire and hold on to the executives who can lead their companies to compete and thrive.”⁹⁷

Editorially, the *New York Times* supported government action on executive pay rules. The editors expressed sympathy with Obama’s plan to cap pay at \$500,000 a year for executives at firms receiving TARP funds, under the assumption that taxpayer money should not be spent on rewarding failed bankers and investors. The *New York Times* reminded readers that “the banks can pay more than the figure Mr. Obama chose...but only in restricted stock that cannot be cashed in until the government has been repaid.” That restriction, the editors concluded, “sounds more than fair to us.”⁹⁸ While the *New York Times* strongly supported pay restrictions, other outlets included in my supplemental analysis did not. The editors at the *New York Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* all opposed pay restrictions. Reasons provided for opposing regulation included repeated references to the “claw back” of salaries as an unconstitutional violation of contractual law, and the claim – explored in the framing section of this analysis – that pay caps “may further damage America’s fragile financial system.”⁹⁹

Editorials and commentary in the *Chicago Sun Times* were similar to those in the *New York Times* in terms of their support for pay restrictions. The paper ran op-eds from two writers who supported regulation, and none from those who were opposed. Supportive op-eds questioned the justification of paying bonuses to retain “talented” executives who he condemned as responsible for creating the economic crisis and collapse, and criticized President Obama’s economic advisors as weak in their resolve due to their initial hesitance to regulate pay.¹⁰⁰ Editorially, the *Chicago Sun Times* encouraged the Obama administration to regulate pay by “threatening to put [companies like AIG] into bankruptcy and end its [the government’s] obligation to pay the bonuses” if AIG refused to rescind them.¹⁰¹

Cable news outlets were defined by commentary that was indexed to the range of opinions displayed by Republican and Democratic officials. *MSNBC* commentary overwhelmingly supported the Obama administration on executive pay. Rachel Maddow interviewed Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill – who had presented legislation in the House aimed at capping pay of executives receiving TARP funds. Maddow asked McCaskill “what can practically be done to recoup [bonus] money that the banks have already spent?”¹⁰² Keith Olbermann sympathized with those seeking to regulate Wall Street pay, and warned of “the gap between the average American and titanic corporations, some of which revealed they had paid out \$18 billion in bonuses after begging for us to bail them out.”¹⁰³ From the perspective of the Democrats, Ed Schultz updated his viewers on Congress’s “progress” with regard to regulating executive pay.¹⁰⁴

Fox News night-time commentary was largely the opposite of *MSNBC*’s, with commentators siding with Republicans and business executives. Efforts to regulate executive pay, Sean Hannity maintained, were part of Obama’s supposed war on the rich, and his efforts to restrict pay for executives at companies receiving TARP funds was seen as “socialism.” Restricting pay was seen as just one part of an Obama agenda dedicated to initiating “a massive redistribution of wealth.”¹⁰⁵ Glenn Beck likened Democratic efforts to restrict pay to “another mob tactic we’ve adopted, getting things done by using intimidation and fear.” Beck compared Democrat Andrew Cuomo with Mafia Don Vito Corleone from the film *The Godfather*. Beck was enraged with Cuomo’s engagement with Wall Street executives, as Cuomo threatened to release a list of AIG executives who received TARP-funded bonuses if they did not return the money.¹⁰⁶ Bill O’Reilly, however, offered limited support for Democrats, agreeing that Democrats should limit executive pay, but only for those companies that received “bailout” money.¹⁰⁷

Evidence of media pluralism is mixed, although evident to some degree in commentary. Three of the eight op-ed writers appearing in the *New York Times* – or 38 percent of all writers – are non-state actors. This finding exceeds the 33 percent threshold for non-state actors established under the

pluralist model. No non-state actors appear in the *Chicago Sun Times* commentary, although it is difficult to draw much from this finding considering there were just two writers in total who even commented on the issue of executive pay. Still, the findings from the *New York Times* are in line with the findings on other issues, as major newspapers examined in this study appeared to allot significant space for pluralistic debate among different types of political actors. Such debate does not call into question the indexing model, however, as those non-state actors who expressed opinions tailored their opinions to the spectrum of opinions already being expressed by national Democrats and Republicans.

E. Conclusion

The results from this chapter fit well with the patterns observed throughout the rest of this dissertation. The indexing model is by far the most useful guide to understanding media content, as it accurately predicts coverage in nearly every test related to coverage of executive compensation. The hegemonic model contains virtually no explanatory power, failing to predict coverage in any of the tests undertaken for both the stimulus and executive pay. The liberal model appears at first to accurately predict coverage in most all of the tests for both issues, but the model completely fails to account for coverage across any issues other than those when Democrats hold unified control of government. Finally, the pluralist model accurately predicts coverage in just one of nine tests for executive pay, and for none of the nine tests on the stimulus. The pluralist model retains some utility in accounting for patterns observed in op-eds for both issues, although the indexing model also works well in accounting for such commentary.

F. Aggregate Results

The content analyses undertaken in this dissertation were noteworthy in terms of the tremendous uniformity in coverage that was found across the media that were examined. Whether it was in an agenda setting paper like the *New York Times*, a regional, wire-story reliant source like the *Chicago Sun Times*, a mass-appealing broadcast network like *CBS*, or in increasingly “partisan” outlets such as *Fox News* or *MSNBC*, coverage overwhelmingly conforms to one overarching pattern. That pattern is best expressed through media indexing, or the tailoring of reporting to the official debates taking place in Washington, and as based upon the formal composition of government, as seen in partisan control of congress and the executive branch.

This dissertation employed a combined 356 separate tests of the indexing, liberal, hegemonic, and pluralist models, covering story headlines, leads, frames, quoted sources, editorials, op-eds, and other qualitative measures of content as provided throughout the chapters. The indexing model successfully predicts coverage and editorial-commentary content in 114 of 126 tests – or 90 percent of the time. Such accuracy is far higher than that seen in other models. The hegemonic model successfully predicts coverage in just 26 of 84 tests, or 31 percent of the time, while the liberal media model is validated in 31 of 84 tests, or 37 percent of the time. The pluralist model is by far the weakest of all, accurately predicting reporting and editorial-commentary content in just 9 of 62 tests, or 15 percent of the time. This final model is well suited for explaining patterns observed in op-eds that appear in major newspapers, but not in forecasting news content.

One should be careful not to attribute too much explanatory power to the hegemonic and liberal models. The finding that each predicts coverage approximately one-third of the time is precisely what one would expect under the basic assumptions of indexing. The case studies undertaken in this study were explicitly chosen because they represented three different types of governing regimes: divided partisan government, unified Democratic government, and unified Republican government.

Considering this breakdown, one would expect, under the assumptions of media indexing, that Democratic voices dominate news one third of time (or in two of the six cases), as seen in reporting on the stimulus and executive pay. One would predict that Republicans dominate reporting one third of the time (in two of six cases), as evident in coverage of tax cuts and Social Security reform. Finally, neither Republican nor Democratic sources should consistently dominate in one third of cases (in two of six issues), when neither party controls government, and as seen in the 1996 and 2007 minimum wage debates. In short, the very limited power of the liberal and hegemonic models (in one third of cases for each model) can just as easily be explained by the assumptions driving the indexing model. One would expect coverage to appear rather hegemonic one-third of the time, when Republicans control government, for coverage to appear quite liberal one-third of the time, when Democrats control government, and for patterns in coverage to be mixed during mixed control of government.

The findings from this chapter and previous ones also suggest that claims that *Fox News* and *MSNBC* represent a new, substantively deviant form of hyper-partisan media may be exaggerated. Night-time programs are undeniably characterized by liberal and conservative ideologies, but a comprehensive analysis of media content that includes daytime programming and news-oriented programs suggests that hyper-partisanship is not systematically evident across all *Fox* and *MSNBC* content – particularly when it comes to news programming. Many programs on those channels (particularly during non-night-time hours) are less partisan, focusing more strongly on reporting the news without regularly or explicitly serving Democratic or Republican goals. This finding does not mean that conservative or liberal views are missing from non-night-time programming, but simply that aggregate results from these outlets suggest that their reporting of public policy is less overtly partisan across the board than has commonly been assumed. Importantly, both *Fox News* and *MSNBC* index the views expressed in their reporting and commentary to the spectrum of opinions expressed by *both*

parties, even if each outlet leans in a more liberal or conservative direction. As evidence suggests, even partisan outlets change their coverage patterns depending on the party composition of government.

Note

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headlines, inter-coder reliability between my analysis and that of the two supplemental coders was: 100% and 100% for *New York Times* headlines; 100% and 100% for *New York Times* leads; and 94% and 91% for *New York Times* quoted sources. For the *Chicago Sun Times* reliability tests were 100% and 100% for headlines; 98% and 99% for leads; and 88% and 96% for quoted sources. For *CBS*: reliability tests were 100% and 100% for headlines. For *MSNBC* tests of leads, reliability was 95% and 92%; for *Fox News* tests, reliability was 95% and 95%.

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VII. CONCLUSION

There is no consensus within the scholarly community regarding whether the liberal media, indexing, hegemonic, or pluralistic models are best able to predict media coverage across a wide variety of domestic policy issues. Some scholars have explicitly disavowed the “liberal vs. conservative” framework of analysis, claiming that this approach is misconceived and degenerative.¹ However, an open exploration of media coverage of public policy disputes *requires* that competing claims are examined and incorporated within one’s research design. Whether Democrats, Republicans, business groups, citizens groups, or government more generally dominate debates over the public policy is a question that remains open to empirical inquiry and testing. Whether reporters and editors stress the “balancing” of both Democratic and Republican official views in their reporting of policy disputes, or favor some other sort of actor, must be verified through observation and documentation, rather than simply through conjecture.

A. Reviewing Major Findings

This dissertation provided systematic answers to the above questions, analyzing coverage of policy conflicts during the mid to late 1990s through the post-2000 period. I examined six major policy debates, including the 1997 and 2007 minimum wage conflicts, the 2001 Bush tax cuts, Social Security reform in 2005, the 2009 stimulus dispute, and the 2009 executive compensation debacle. I reviewed patterns in coverage that appeared across headlines, story leads, quoted sources, mentions of partisan actors, competing ideological frames, and editorial and op-ed commentary. My analysis uncovered little evidence of the reliability of the liberal media, hegemonic, or pluralist models. Rather, the indexing model was the most consistent and powerful predictor of media coverage across *every* issue in question. Under the indexing model, one expects that the composition of government itself is the determining

factor that drives the tone of media coverage. In other words, party regime composition is the most important factor in influencing which political actors dominate the news and which do not. As my findings demonstrate, when one party exercises unified control over government, that party receives the most attention in terms of dominance of headlines, leads, quoted sourcing, and partisan mentions. More broadly speaking, government itself (and its composition) appears to be the defining factor that determines unfolding patterns in reporting on public policy.

Some limited evidence was found in support of a pluralist approach to studying media content. Op-eds in major newspapers were written by a wide variety of individuals hailing from many different backgrounds. Many of these actors were officials, but many were also non-government officials (non-state actors). The regular appearance of the latter suggests that there is considerable room on op-ed pages for pluralistic debate between many different social actors, including academics, think tank representatives, business leaders, government officials, and representatives of citizens groups, among others. These findings, however, speak poorly to the broader applicability of the pluralist model, as it failed regularly to accurately predict patterns of coverage in major news stories.

I found no evidence in this study that the legislative or executive branch consistently dominated or determined reporting on various public policy issues. Both branches shared center stage, dominating stories over other types of actors, such as members of the judiciary, bureaucrats, academics, general citizens, workers, and business officials. In specific circumstances, some non-state actors appeared more often than at other times – although none ever came close to eclipsing government officials in terms of the regularity of their appearances in stories. One stark example was the regular appearance of business actors during the executive compensation conflict. In this instance, business actors largely stood in for Republicans – who failed to appear regularly in stories in terms of defending Wall Street firms that accepted taxpayer bailout funds. At a time when Republicans were in the minority in government (under Democratic unified rule), party members still appeared in stories far less often than

one would have expected under the assumptions of the indexing model. This failure of the Republicans to appear in such stories was likely because of the extreme unpopularity at the time of being seen as sympathetic to Wall Street investors and business interests. This reality should not be surprising, considering that the United States was in the midst of an economic crisis and recession in which national commentators and reporters were regularly discussing questionable practices and behaviors engaged in by business investors and banks. In this volatile political climate, business interests were forced to make their own case in opposition to increased government regulation of executive pay.

The failure of Republicans to appear regularly in stories on executive compensation is not an isolated incident. Members of one political party are at times marginalized when they consciously decide to refrain from participating in major public policy initiatives. Such marginalization was also evident in the 2007 minimum wage case, when Republicans failed to regularly appear in stories. In that policy conflict, President Bush helped marginalize potential Republican opponents to a minimum wage when he indicated that he would not oppose the raise if tax cuts for businesses were also included in final legislation. In the minimum wage case, Democratic dominance was also aided by the speed with which the party acted on proposing and passing a wage increase. This speed (as seen in the House of Representatives' quick passage of the minimum wage increase) was no doubt enabled by Democratic majority control of that chamber, which emerged following the 2006 midterm elections. In other words, quick action, coupled with institutional dominance and Republican Presidential acquiescence, both appear to have set the stage for Democratic dominance of reporting on the minimum wage. This finding suggests that, even during periods of split partisan control of government, specific developments and conditions may still enable one party to dominate public discourse and reporting.

B. Secondary Findings and Their Implications

A number of secondary findings from this dissertation – which were not the primary subject of my inquiry – should be reflected upon here. The first finding is the revelation that the differences between partisan media such as *Fox News* and *MSNBC* – while very real – may also be strongly exaggerated. I certainly found evidence of major and significant deviation in cable news content when it came to nighttime punditry based programs. *Fox News* is undeniably pioneering a conservative approach that appears more similar to the earlier periods of the American partisan press than to the system of objective reporting that became the dominant journalistic paradigm more than a century ago. Similarly, *MSNBC* recently (as of 2008) appropriated a similar partisan approach in its nighttime lineup, but instead focused on stocking its programs with liberal personalities, so as to compete with *Fox* for partisan news viewers.

The recent public preoccupation with the rise of partisan media, however, should not be exaggerated. This study took the middle ground between those who would argue on the one hand that *MSNBC* and *Fox News* are polar opposites ideologically in terms of their content, and those on the other hand who might see little to no difference in both outlets, with both being framed as indistinct components of a larger uniform corporate and hegemonic media. My content analysis found little evidence that the partisan biases at *Fox* and *MSNBC* consistently molded *news reporting* at these outlets so severely that either outlet consistently favored their preferred political party. Standards of balance have partially survived in these new partisan media outlets, as daytime news anchors and program hosts seek to retain some level of objectivity in their reporting of competing points of view. Such attempts at being “fair and balanced” and reporting multiple sides to an issue are still evident on a significant level in partisan media reporting, even if these outlets are increasingly appealing to one side of partisan political debates. Outlets like *Fox News* obviously cater to conservative positions in their punditry programs (and even in much of their reporting), but they are still forced to come to terms with the partisan regimes in

power in government. Ultimately, Democratic control of congress and the executive will inevitably be followed by many successful Democratic efforts to set the political agenda, whether the issue is health care reform, stimulus spending, executive bonuses, or some other topic. Much of the reporting and commentary at partisan outlets like *Fox News* and *MSNBC* will inevitably be tailored to reporting the basic policy positions of the party regime that is in power. This role for partisan media will persist, in addition to their more polemical role in advocating for or against specific partisan platforms and policy proposals.

Another secondary finding in this dissertation relates back to the concept of new institutionalism and journalistic news beats. As discussed in the literature review from Chapter 1, new institutionalism as a school of analysis stresses the importance of journalistic norms and routines in terms of influencing news content. One such norm is the stressing of “objectivity,” often defined as the balancing of competing viewpoints originating from prominent political actors such as the president and members of congress. This definition of objectivity privileges official sources through various newsbeats located at the white house and capitol hill, among other governmental offices and institutions. Scholars such as Herbert Gans who focus on the importance of journalistic norms in determining media content emphasize the tendency of reporters to gravitate toward “known” sources, featuring (most prominently) leading political officials. The preoccupation of new institutionalism with the official source, indexing bias is well warranted in light of the results from this study. My analysis consistently finds that journalists seek to “objectively” balance both liberal and conservative points of view expressed by political leaders, even though the parties seldom exercise equal prominence during times of unified control of government. This finding is a predictable result of the newsbeat process. When journalists rely on members of congress and the executive to set the news agenda, it is to be expected that the party in power will dominate that agenda.

C. Unanswered Questions and Future Research

No single media model can effectively predict coverage one hundred percent of the time. I did not expect such dominance on the part of indexing, but rather found that the model accounted for an overwhelming amount of the variation in the tone of reporting across many policy issues. Many questions still remain, however, with regard to the study of mass media and politics. In this dissertation, I found impressive evidence in support of the notion that government officials dominate reporting of public policy debates. Still unclear is whether such dominance of reporting also translates into a dominance of the public mind. The question of media effects, and whether such effects even exist with regard to media outlets influencing the public's policy attitudes, need to be further examined. Public opinion data is readily available measuring public attentiveness to media and political debates on issues such as executive pay regulation, Social Security reform, tax cut proposals, and stimulus spending. Such an analysis will need to be undertaken if one is to further generalize with regard to the applicability of the indexing model to public attitudes. Do specific partisan regimes influence public attitudes in favor of their preferred agendas via dominance of news reports? Are the opponents of the president and his party (those from the competing party or even from within the president's party) able to derail policy agendas when they direct critical attention toward the party in power? Do news outlets influence more than simply what issues people think about or how they think about them – also influencing peoples' actual policy attitudes? These questions remain contentious in an era when the study of media effects is a main concern for many scholars.

A second unanswered question covers the potential power of the hegemonic model to account for media coverage in other ways than those explored in this dissertation. Results of the tests undertaken here suggest that the hegemonic model is unable to account for patterns of coverage observed within news stories. The question remains open, however, with regard to how powerful hegemony is in accounting for patterns that do *not* appear in news coverage. Clearly, more blunt forms

of hegemony predicting a blatant and across-the-board domination of stories by business actors and Republicans is *not* evident in news stories. But do hegemonic, pro-business pressures influence coverage in more indirect, implicit ways?

Hegemonic pressures may not be evident within stories, but could play a role, nonetheless, behind closed doors in news rooms and in terms of influencing editors' decisions. Pro-business advertising pressures *may* influence news content by preventing stories that are critical of business interests from appearing very often in news stories. Such pressures, if they exist, are impossible to expose by analyzing news stories, considering that one cannot identify within stories critical aspects that were removed from those stories due to reporters' self-censorship or pressures on or from editors. In short, it remains extremely difficult to identify whether implicit hegemonic pressures exist, without the benefit of access to more full information about the news production process. Future research should measure whether the hegemonic model offers valuable insights by examining how news routines may or may not be influenced by advertiser pressures. An extensive survey of whether such pressures occur – or at least a thorough review of already-existing surveys seeking to measure such pressures – is in order before a full evaluation of the hegemonic model can take place.

The unanswered questions above demonstrate the limitations of this dissertation, despite the authoritative findings discussed throughout. Further research will also be necessary in order to assess whether the findings from the six case studies undertaken here are applicable across many other domestic policy disputes. This dissertation offers an important first step in comprehensively assessing a variety of competing models used to explain media reporting on public policy. The study of American media and domestic policy, however, remains under-examined as a field of research. The four media models examined here must be subject to rigorous testing across many other issues. Considering the lack of such studies, the debate over media bias will likely continue into the foreseeable future.

Notes

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