Combative Politics

The Media and Public Perceptions of Lawmaking

M A R Y   L A Y T O N   A T K I N S O N

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Introduction

Conflict Breeds Opposition

> Those who believe that Americans don't notice or don't care about how things get done are deluding themselves. . . . Democracy, in other words, is as much about process—how we go about resolving our differences and crafting policy—as it is about result. —Lee Hamilton, former member of the U.S. House of Representatives

Health care reform topped President Clinton's domestic agenda in 1993 and 1994. It also topped the public's agenda. Ninety percent of Americans believed there was a crisis in the nation's health care system (Blenndon et al. 1995) and 74% wanted to see a system of universal coverage put in place (ABC News Poll 1994). The Clinton Administration devised a plan to do just that—one that included a range of provisions supported by huge majorities of the public. But, despite the overwhelming popularity of the policy's individual provisions, the plan itself received lukewarm public support and grew increasingly unpopular over the course of a protracted, partisan debate.

This disconnect between public support for the specifics of a policy and opposition to the plan as a whole has been observed time and again in modern American politics. For instance, public support for President Obama's health reform plan closely paralleled support for the Clinton plan. Many of the policy's specific provisions, like the requirement that insurance companies offer coverage to everyone who applies, were favored by as much as 80% of the public (Kaiser 2009). But the plan itself was far less popular. Opposition to it mounted over the course of a fierce debate in Washington and support for it fell to roughly 40% by the end of 2010.

Many Republican proposals have faced the same fate. Support for the specific substantive provisions of President G. W. Bush's Social Security reforms, the No Child Left Behind Act, and the Federal Marriage Amendment were all much more popular than were the reform packages as a whole.

In this book, I offer a unifying theory that explains why members of the public frequently reject policies that seem to give them exactly what they want. Throughout, I develop and test my theory, which centers on public response to media coverage of the policy-making process—reactions that are distinct from partisan attitudes about specific policies. I demonstrate that the passage of bills with popular provisions can result in a public backlash stemming from exposure (via the news media) to the unpopular process of policy making.

How the Public Sees Policy Making: An Overview

Most people expect the government to help correct the problem of the moment, whether it be the high cost of health care, the ballooning budget deficit, or the insolvency of Social Security. With broad support for reform, lawmakers begin to debate a course of action. With bipartisan support, a reform might become law quickly. But more often, the initial bipartisan agreement that something must be done is eroded by a partisan dispute over what exactly will be done. The negotiations between and within the parties span weeks, months, and sometimes years. All the while the rhetoric becomes more heated and partisan as the stakes increase in proportion to the political capital expended.

Public affairs journalists and editors have incentives to focus on the partisan conflict and debate inherent in the legislative process. Doing so increases the entertainment value of their reports, provides a running story line that can be updated regularly, and conforms to norms regarding what constitutes balanced coverage. As a result, the partisan rhetoric on the Hill is only amplified by the news media, who track the successes and setbacks of each party, presenting political elites as polarized forces. Day-to-day and week-to-week, reporters document the compromises, concessions, roadblocks, and strategies employed by lawmakers on either side of the aisle. Factual information about the contents of a given bill is provided within this framework of partisan conflict and strategic maneuvering.

All the while, members of the public wait for a resolution to their problem. They follow the news about the debate, hoping to learn how the plan taking shape in Washington will help people like them. What they learn from the news coverage of the debate is that lawmakers cannot find common ground. Everyone in Washington seems to have lost sight of the problem at hand and to be pursuing policies designed for their own political gain. Special interests, rather than the interests of the common Joe and Jane are shaping the policy. And the tenor of the debate has deteriorated into a partisan brawl.

With their problem still unresolved and lawmakers wasting time on needless, ineffectual debate, members of the public become frustrated and deeply unsettled by the inability of lawmakers to work together. Many start to see the debate as ridiculous and disgusting rather than productive and healthy. These negative attitudes toward the policy-making process quickly become inextricably linked in people's minds with the policy itself. When they think about the policy they can't help but think about the partisan battle being waged over it—and this association tarnishes their view of the policy itself. As the debate drags on and reporters continue to offer blow-by-blow coverage of the fight, the association of the policy with the ugly process used to produce it grows stronger. As a result, public opposition to the policy mounts. By the time a resolution comes (in the form of a bill's passage or ultimate defeat), the public's patience is exhausted, and its focus has often turned to a new problem.

Fig. 1.1 provides a visual summary of this sequence of events. The theory boils down to four key elements: (1) the presence of policy debate in Washington, which (2) generates news reports on the policy-making process, which (3) leads to negative public sentiment toward the policy-making process. Lastly, because negative conceptions about the law-making process become linked to the policy itself in people's minds, the
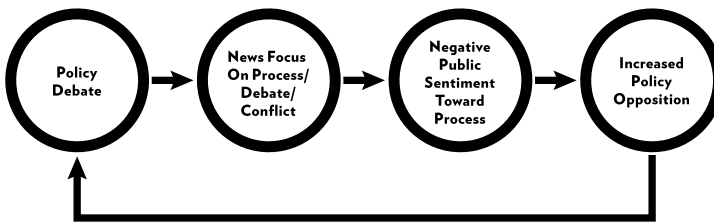

FIG. 1.1. Causal Process Leading to Increased Policy Opposition.

end result of this chain of events is decreased support and increased opposition to the policy at hand.

This process is self-reinforcing. Strategic politicians who oppose the legislation understand that prolonging debate can work in their favor. An incentive exists for the opposition to use parliamentary maneuvers (like the filibuster) to stall the progress of the bill, which in turn provides fodder for the news media, leading to more process coverage, more negative sentiment about the process, and a further increase in policy opposition. The time dynamic is, therefore, one of great importance. The longer the time span between the introduction of the bill and its ultimate passage (or defeat), the longer the system shown here remains a closed, self-reinforcing one. Only a conclusion to the debate can break the cycle.

This creates perverse incentives for lawmakers in the minority party. Those who want to stymie the majority party's legislative agenda have an incentive to generate controversy around the majority's proposals— even when (and perhaps especially when) the substance of the legislation is publicly popular. Doing so generates media attention focused on the political conflict as opposed to the popular substance of the legislation. This coverage can dampen public support for the proposal at the center of the debate, reinforcing the minority party's commitment to conflict. The incentives that motivate reporters and lawmakers, thus, predictably reinforce each other's behavior, creating a feedback loop.

For the remainder of this chapter I attend to unpacking this dynamic process. I pay particular attention to the motives that drive news reporters and the cognitive processes that underscore opinion formation. The theory developed applies to a wide range of policies including health care, social welfare, economic, and morality policies and it transcends more simplistic partisan explanations of public opposition to major proposals. The hypotheses derived from the theory developed here are then tested throughout the book via multiple methods including analysis of media coverage, individual level experiments, aggregate analyses, and case studies of specific policies.

If It Bleeds, It Leads

The old adage that violence, war, and crime sell newspapers remains as true today as ever. It is not surprising, then, that political reporting is

rife with war metaphors. Physical violence rarely breaks out among law-makers, but, judging from news reports, verbal assault is an everyday oc-currence on Capitol Hill. Reports about policy making describe con-flicts among lawmakers in gory detail as a way of attracting attention to an otherwise bloodless sport. Headlines allude to battles among po-litical elites and highlight the strategies employed by those on opposite sides of the fight.

This type of conflict-focused reporting is so common that communi-cations scholars have classified it as one of a handful of "generic news frames" employed by journalists (de Vreese 2002).[1] These frames pro-vide reporters with templates for synthesizing complex information in ways that are routine and manageable for both the writer and the reader. The "conflict frame," which bears similarity to the "strategic" frame and "game schema," is a generic frame with a narrative structure that pre-sents actors as polarized forces (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Re-ports that employ the frame focus on which side is winning and losing, and often include language related to war, competition, and games (Ca-pella and Jamieson 1996; Jamieson 1992; Neuman et al. 1992; Patterson 1993).

Scholars have documented the conflict frame's frequent use in cam-paign coverage and posit that it likely dominates public affairs report-ing more generally (Capella and Jamieson 1997; Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1993; Zaller 1999).[2] This assumption is based on an un-derstanding of the goals and incentives that motivate journalists. Like politicians—whose primary goal is to attract voters—the primary goal of journalists is to attract an audience (Zaller 1999). Achieving this goal has become more difficult for traditional news outlets over the past few decades owing to increased competition from the proliferation of soft news, online news, and cable news sources. The greater this competition, the more newsmakers seek to tailor their products to the preferences of their target audiences (Postman 1985; Zaller 1999). And what audi-ences want is not hard news, but entertainment (e.g., Bennett 1996; Gra-ber 1984; Iyengar, Norpoth, Hanh 2004; Neuman 1991; Postman 1985; Zaller 1999). By emphasizing conflict—a key ingredient in film, televi-sion, literature, and sports—journalists are able to increase the enter-tainment value of public affairs reports (Iyengar, Norpoth, Hanh 2004; Zaller 1999). Yet, in so doing, journalists are also able to uphold profes-sional norms of objectivity and to offer "balanced" coverage.

Journalistic Norms

News reporters seek to provide objective portrayals of the events and opinions they cover. To do so, they rely on professional norms and regularized procedures in gathering and reporting the news. One such norm, often referred to as indexing, is the practice of reflecting opinions in relation to how widely they are expressed by political elites (Bennett 1990; Hallin 1984; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). Objectivity is, therefore, predicated upon reporting all *sides* of an issue, not upon reporting the *facts*, as the relevant facts in a policy debate might be subjective.

Interviews with journalists support these assertions. When asked what they believe constitutes objectivity in news reporting, a plurality of American journalists (39%) stated "expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute" (Patterson 2007, 29). Another 10% stated "an equally thorough questioning of the position of each side in a political dispute" (Patterson 2007, 29). Together, 49% of the journalists surveyed stressed the importance of gathering and reporting information from elites on both sides of a political debate. Just 28% stated that "going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute" constitutes objectivity, and 14% gave other responses (Patterson 2007, 29). By structuring reports around the two sides of the story, the conflict frame coheres to this norm of balanced reporting.

Focusing on the competition between political actors also allows journalists to craft a running story line that can be updated regularly (Patterson 1993). The same cannot be said for reports that focus on the policy platforms of candidates or the provisions of pending legislation. Politicians stumping for a policy or for election are coached to stay "on message" by emphasizing and reemphasizing key talking points (Patterson 1993). As a result, daily (or hourly) news reports focused on the substance of these appeals would be extremely monotonous. Focusing instead on the dynamic, often contentious process of policy making allows journalists to craft reports that are fresh each day. These process stories evaluate how politician's messages are being received by the public, which candidate or lawmaker is polling ahead, and what strategies could be used to improve the fortunes of the underdog.

For all of these reasons, conflict is an essential determinant of an event's newsworthiness. But this relentless focus on conflict sometimes leads reporters to offer the public a skewed depiction of lawmaking. For

instance, Eric Montpetit (2016) shows that when covering lawmaking, reporters focus on the opinions of a few "celebrity politicians or other highly visible individuals taking unexpected positions—sometimes extreme ones" (5). Other actors, who are central to the policy-making process but whose views and tactics are less extreme—such as bureaucrats and nongovernmental experts—are absent from media portrayals of the debate. By excluding the views of these more moderate actors and focusing on the most controversial aspects of the debate, the news media magnify the disagreement. As Montpetit puts it, "the disagreements covered by the media are so out of proportion that they can only inspire a strong sense of disapproval among citizens" (2016, 5).

Numerous authors who find that citizens have negative reactions to the political conflicts they learn about from the news media share this conclusion. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) use aggregate level survey data to show that media coverage of "polarized policy struggle" generates public uncertainty about the reforms and a sense that "their personal well-being is threatened" by it (27). Cappella and Jamieson (1996) use an experimental design to demonstrate that campaign coverage focused on strategy and political tactics results in higher levels of cynicism among study participants than does coverage concentrating on policy issues. In another experimental study, Forgette and Morris (2006) show that "conflict-laden television coverage decreases public evaluations of political institutions, trust in leadership, and overall support for political parties and the system as a whole" (447). Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) couple survey data with content analysis to demonstrate that periods of heightened conflict in Congress and the reflection of that conflict in the news have a negative impact on Congressional approval. In the context of campaign advertisements, a number of studies find that exposure to negativity and incivility decreases turnout (Kahn and Kenney 1999), political trust (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Mutz and Reeves 2005), and feelings of political efficacy (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Lau et al. 2007).[3] Members of the public may be entertained by partisan battles, but this evidence collectively suggests that they are simultaneously sickened by it.

Why Americans Love to Hate Political Conflict

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that these types of negative responses to policy debate occur because many Americans view debate

as politically motivated bickering that stands in the way of real problem
solving. Americans generally believe there is consensus around the goals
government should pursue—like a strong economy, low crime, and qual-
ity education—and think lawmakers should "just select the best way of
bringing about these end goals without wasting time and needlessly ex-
posing people to politics" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 133). The
fact that a best solution may not be apparent or available does not occur
to some members of the public. Particularly among those with lower lev-
els of political knowledge and weaker policy preferences, "people equate
the presence of dissenting policy proposals with the presence of special
interests and the attendant demotion of the true consensual, general in-
terest" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 157).

Political elites and members of the press further the idea that debate
is unneeded and unhealthy for a democracy. A ready example comes
from public discussion of Standard & Poor's decision to downgrade the
United States' credit rating in 2011. The downgrade came after Demo-
crats and Republicans ended weeks of heated deliberation over deficit
reduction by agreeing to legislation that slashed government spending
and increased the nation's debt ceiling. The agency's decision to down-
grade the nation's debt, therefore, came after a compromise was reached
and the threat of a government default had passed. Standard and Poor's
instead cited "the difficulties in bridging the gulf between the politi-
cal parties," as a primary concern in the report they released on Au-
gust 5 (Swann 2011, 2). The report went on to say that intense partisan
debate led the agency to question the "effectiveness, stability, and pre-
dictability of American policymaking and political institutions" (Swann
2011, 2). President Obama echoed these concerns in his remarks about
the downgrade:

> On Friday, we learned that the United States received a downgrade by one of
> the credit rating agencies—not so much because they doubt our ability to pay
> our debt if we make good decisions, but because after witnessing a month of
> wrangling over raising the debt ceiling, they doubted our political system's
> ability to act. . . . So it's not a lack of plans or policies that's the problem here.
> It's a lack of political will in Washington. It's the insistence on drawing lines
> in the sand, a refusal to put what's best for the country ahead of self-interest
> or party or ideology. And that's what we need to change (Presidential Re-
> marks 2011).

Here, the president himself asserts that partisan posturing and conflict represents "a refusal to put what's best for the country ahead of self-interest or party or ideology" (Presidential Remarks 2011). The argument that both parties might have fundamentally different views over what course is best for the country—and that public debate over which party has the better plan might be needed—was not raised.

Other examples of this attitude abound. For instance, a 2011 *Newsweek* cover was emblazoned with the headline "Let's Just Fix It!" The sub-headline touted, "Forget Washington. Move over Mr. President. Everyday Americans Can Turn This Country Around." The implication, of course, was that politicians are not serving the public interest. If average Americans were in charge, they would quickly select and implement the "best" solutions to our problems without allowing partisanship to stand in their way. Similarly, a 2012 *New Yorker* cartoon poked fun at the political process with a caption that read, "After months of partisan bickering, Congress has finally agreed to put a Slinky on an escalator and see if it goes forever" (Kanin 2012). These examples reflect the pervasive attitude that conflict and debate stand in the way of problem solving in Washington.

In sum many Americans, political elites, and members of the press view policy debate as political theater and as an impediment to problem solving. This is in part because of the public preference for cooperation between lawmakers that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) identify, in part because many Americans don't know why debate is sometimes needed, and in part because journalists concentrate on the most heated and controversial aspects of the debate (Montpetit 2016). In actuality, debate serves many functions, some of which are purely political and some of which are vital to the health of a democratic system. To be sure, politicians are always on the lookout for ways to bolster their electoral fortunes. We can expect lawmakers to call press conferences and dig in their heels when they believe taking a strong position will ingratiate them with voters, donors, or organized interests. But policy disputes also erupt when lawmakers hold sharply different views over the best course of action for the country. Contrary to public perception, the "best solution" to a complex problem is rarely self-evident. Policy making requires legislators to weigh many potential options that each have merits and drawbacks, and to speculate about future needs and resources. Lawmakers often come to different conclusions about which option is best

because their preferences are guided by divergent sets of values, world-views, and predictions about the future.

A democratic process requires that such differences be aired publicly, and that citizens and members of the press be allowed to weigh in. In theory, shining sunlight on the deliberations should result in the adoption of policies that better align with public preferences, and should help minimize opportunities for government corruption. This is yet another reason why conflict is a determinant of newsworthiness; however, these legitimate reasons for public debate are seldom highlighted by the press. Instead, reporters fixate on the political ramifications of partisan contests and downplay the substantive differences at the heart of the debate. This coverage reinforces the public view that political interests rather than genuine differences of opinion motivate policy debate. As outlined above, this cynical belief then underscores negative public evaluations of the government, Congress, and the political system as a whole. In this book, I demonstrate that the media's use of the conflict frame also has predictable and important effects on individual level support for the policy proposals at the center of heated debates. Reform plans with popular provisions—like the Health Security Act, The Affordable Care Act, and No Child Left Behind—can become objects of public scorn because of their association with the unpopular, contentious process of policy making. How and why this backlash occurs is best understood as a result of the associative process of attitude formation.

The Process of Attitude Formation

The processes by which frames influence attitudes have been well documented in the cognitive psychology and political psychology literature and are grounded in the expectancy value model of attitude formation (e.g., Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Chong and Druckman 2007; Fishbein and Hunter 1964; Nelson et al. 1997b). Very simply stated, this model describes attitude formation as a process that aggregates across the mix of information an individual associates with a given target (like a policy, a political figure, or a government institution). All things being equal, if the target is associated with mostly positive considerations, the individual will express an overall positive attitude toward the target. If the target is associated with mostly negative considerations, the individual

will express an overall negative attitude. But all things are rarely equal. When some considerations become more salient to an individual—perhaps because they were central to a political campaign or were featured repeatedly in the news—those considerations will weigh more heavily in the individual's evaluation of the target (e.g., Fazio 2007; Lodge and Taber 2013; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). And because most individuals are at least somewhat ambivalent toward most issues—meaning they hold some positive and some negative considerations in mind—this reweighting can alter the individual's overall opinion of the target (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992).

An example helps to demonstrate how this process works. Assume the target is the President of the United States. A given individual will associate many different pieces of information with the president—like his political affiliation, his stance on issues like taxes, human rights, the environment, and so forth, and information about his personality and leadership skills. Fig. 1.2 shows a visual representation of the associative map one individual might construct from this information about the president. In the top portion of the figure we see that some of the associated information is positive (as indicated with plus signs) and some of this information is negative (as indicated with minus signs). Our sample citizen likes that the president is a Democrat, likes the president's stance on taxes, and thinks the president has a number of positive personal traits. But this individual does not like the president's stances on the environment and human rights.

If all of these associated concepts were equally weighted (as in the top portion of fig. 1.2), the individual would form an overall positive impression of the president because positive considerations outnumber negative ones. But if a political opponent began to publicly and frequently criticize the president's stance on human rights—attracting media attention and public interest to the topic—the issue would become more salient for our sample citizen. The more salient the issue of human rights becomes, the more heavily it will weigh in his overall assessment of the president. If the topic became salient enough, negative considerations about human rights would overwhelm positive considerations about the president, and this individual would form an overall negative impression of the commander-in-chief. This situation is displayed in the bottom portion of fig. 1.2.

This is a stylized example of how framing shapes opinions. News
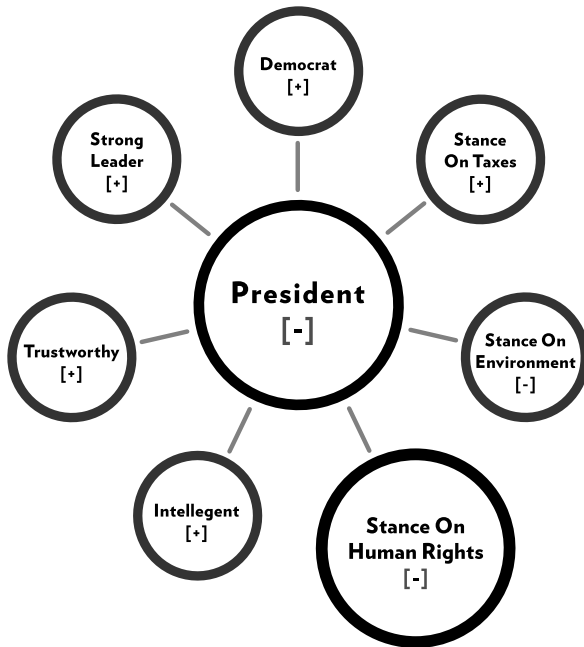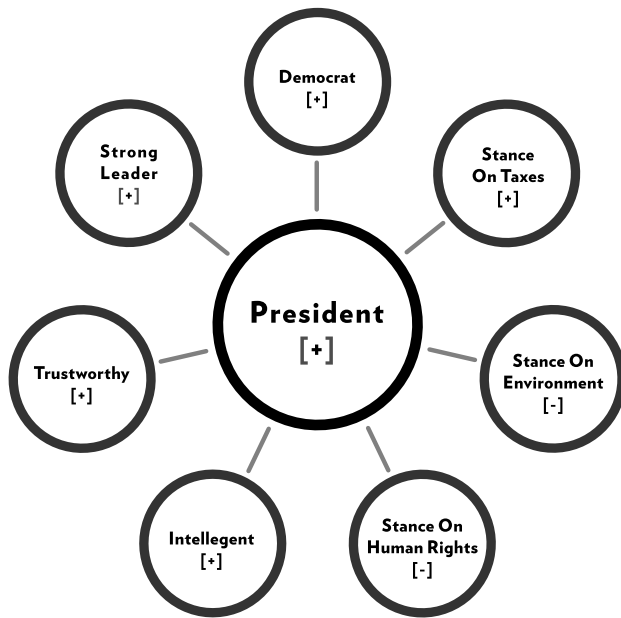
FIG. 1.2. Associative Map: Conceptions Linked to the President.

frames provide "a central organizing idea" that focuses attention on one dimension of an issue or event (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3; also see Entman 1993). In so doing, frames elevate the salience of particular considerations and demote the salience of others—implying what information is central and what should be "left out, treated as secondary, tertiary, or less" (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 45; also see: Druckman and Nelson 2003; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Nelson and Kinder 1996). By encouraging individuals to draw connections between particular concepts and heightening the salience of particular considerations, frames can shape political opinions, as demonstrated by numerous studies. Framing has been shown to shape policy preferences on a broad range of issues, including capital punishment (Baumgartner DeBoef and Boydstun 2008), the Kosovo War (Berinsky and Kinder 2006), government spending (Jacoby 2000), affirmative action (Kinder and Sanders 1990), gun policy (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001), public health policy (Tversky and Kahneman 1981 and 1987), and many others.

These framing effects can be limited or moderated by a number of known factors. The credibility of the source of information and the presence of competing frames can influence framing effects (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007b; Druckman 2001). Further, individuals with strong prior attitudes have been shown to discount information that challenges them—a process known as motivated reasoning (e.g., Fischle 2000; Kim et al. 2010; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006). Individuals with strong attitudes may, therefore, be less susceptible to framing effects. Yet even with these limitations, framing can have a powerful effect on aggregate level public opinion. For instance, Frank Baumgartner and his colleagues demonstrate the role framing has played in shaping mass attitudes toward the death penalty (Baumgartner et al. 2008). The authors tracked and catalogued the frames used in news articles about capital punishment over the course of several decades. They found that, over time, public discourse on capital punishment shifted from a focus on the moral necessity of retribution to the potential innocence of the accused. These two sets of considerations support different evaluations of capital punishment—the former supports a positive evaluation of the policy while the latter supports a negative one. By heightening the salience of considerations that support a negative evaluation of the policy, the shift in framing led public support for the death penalty to diminish over time (Baumgartner et al. 2008).

The Impact of the Conflict Frame on Policy Attitudes

The conflict frame shapes opinions in a similar way by highlighting neg-
ative information about the policy-making process and obscuring in-
formation about the substance of proposed bills. As I will demonstrate
in chapter 2, news reports rarely focus on the link between policy pro-
posals and the problems they are designed to redress—information that
might be viewed positively by many members of the public. As described
above, journalists instead emphasize the role that proposed bills play in
a larger partisan contest.

This pattern of news coverage suggests that policy debate is funda-
mentally a political process rather than an exercise in problem solving.
And it leads many Americans to believe that lawmakers are striving to
advance their own interests rather than the common good. *This is es-
pecially true for those who know less about how government works* and
who do not have strong preexisting policy preference. These individuals
are not married to any particular policy solution and do not have strong
feelings about the provisions that would make a bill desirable or unde-
sirable. This is in part because they have trouble understanding the rela-
tionships between specific provisions and their potential outcomes (Ar-
nold 1990). Without a dog in the fight, people simply want lawmakers
to choose a solution that will "work" and think finding one would be
straightforward if lawmakers would work together. For these reasons,
heated debate between lawmakers over the details of legislation seems
contrived rather than legitimate to these Americans. When they turn on
the evening news, they hope to hear how proposed policies will fix prob-
lems and improve their lives. Instead, they learn that Democrats and Re-
publicans are at each other's throats. They hear how the issue will affect
the upcoming elections. And they hear about parliamentary maneuver-
ing, delays, and veto threats. In short, debate sends a clear signal (ampli-
fied by the news media) that politicians are not working to advance the
common good. Instead, these individuals view policy debate as a sign
that lawmakers are prioritizing their political goals and that the govern-
ment is broken.

The application of the conflict frame to reports about lawmaking es-
tablishes the centrality of these negative considerations about the policy-
making process to evaluations of the policies themselves. As a result,
this framing has the power to shape the associative maps news consum-

ers construct in their minds. When news coverage about a pending policy is dominated by descriptions of the tenor of the debate, the associative maps constructed by news consumers will also be dominated by these negative considerations. As shown in fig. 1.3, this means that information about the process has the potential to overwhelm substantive considerations in the formation of policy attitudes. Here, the individual has information in mind about four of the major the provisions that make up the bill under consideration—and she likes each of those provisions. But she does not like that the bill is associated with a partisan, divisive legislative process. This information about the process is highly salient, and so it dominates her associative map, leaving her with an overall negative impression of the bill. This is why individuals often reject policies that are comprised of discrete provisions they favor. Policy support is a function not only of the content of the legislation, but also of the process that produced it (as described by the news media). When the latter is more salient than the former, it will play a critical role in shaping policy opinion.
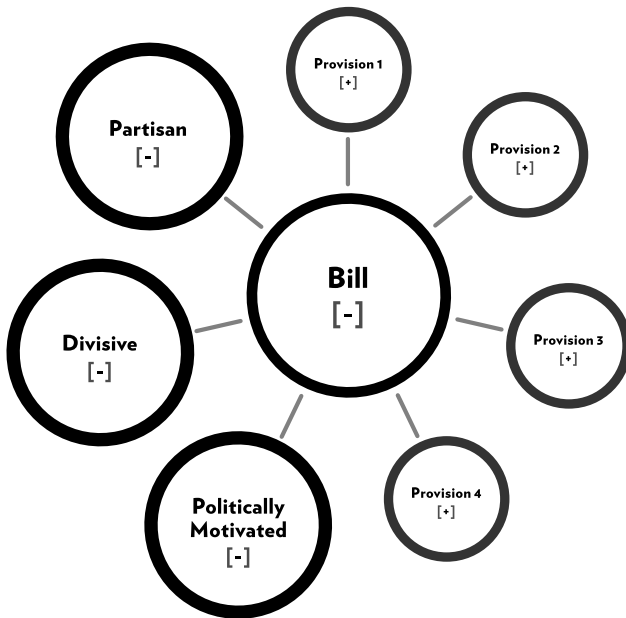

FIG. 1.3. Associative Map: Conceptions Linked to a Bill.

Political Sophistication and the Indirect Effect of Conflict

Some Americans are more knowledgeable than others about politics, the policy-making process, and the substantive details of current policy debates. These individuals, who also tend to have stronger preexisting policy opinions, constitute a minority of the public. For several reasons, they will respond differently to partisan conflict than will the less informed, average Americans described above. First, because they know more about pending legislation, political actors, and world events, the associative maps political sophisticates construct around these targets will be populated with a larger number of considerations (Zaller and Feldman 1992). With more considerations in mind, several authors find that the politically knowledgeable are less susceptible to the influence of framing effects (i.e., Feldman 1989; Iyengar 1991; Zaller 1990; Zaller and Feldman 1992).[4] As explained by Zaller and Feldman (1992), "attitude reports formed from an average of many considerations will be a more reliable indicator of the underlying population of considerations than an average based on just one or two considerations" (597).

Take, for example, the associative map displayed in fig. 1.3. If we add information about several more provisions to this map (as in fig. 1.4), negative information about the tenor of the debate (salient as it is) would no longer be able to outweigh information about the bill's substance. Having more information in mind can temper the influence of news frames and lead to attitude stability. For this reason, the mere association of a policy with conflict is less likely to depress support for it among the most knowledgeable individuals.

People who are more knowledgeable about politics are also better able to link policy issues and proposals to the liberal/conservative continuum (Converse 1964). This allows them to understand the ideological differences between discrete policy provisions and to distinguish liberal proposals from conservative ones. With this better understanding of the differences between provisions comes greater acceptance of policy debate between lawmakers. When a partisan fight erupts over which provisions to include or exclude from a bill, these individuals are more likely than others to see the conflict as a legitimate expression of ideological differences. In fact, these individuals typically view politics through an ideological lens and use ideology to structure their own political preferences and beliefs (Converse 1964). Unlike less sophisticated Americans,
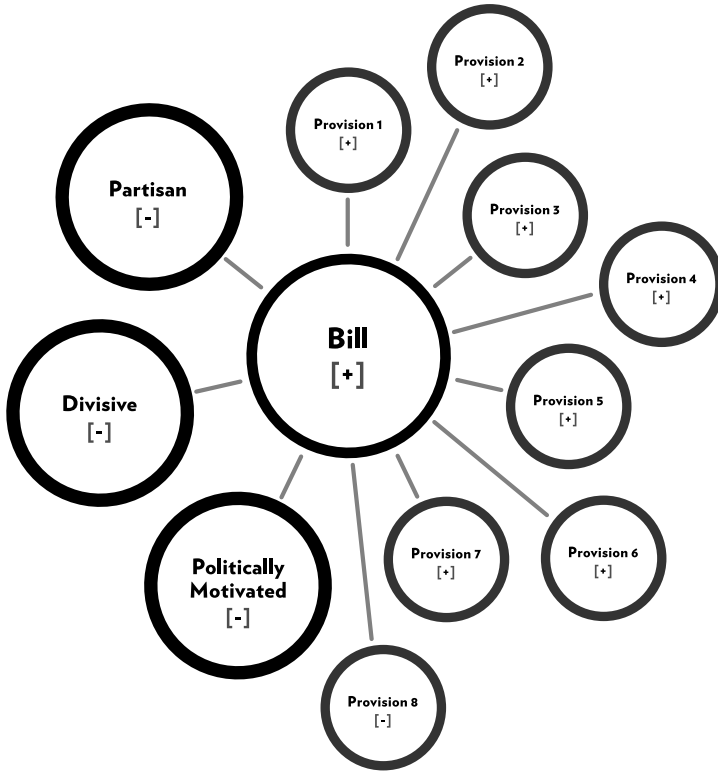
FIG. I.4. Associative Map for a Knowledgeable Individual.

these "ideologues" *are* partial to specific policy provisions and *do* have a dog in the fight. They want to see policies enacted that align with their ideological worldviews and follow debates in Washington to learn how closely proposed legislation matches up with their preferences. Ideologues then use this information to decide whether they will support new proposals.

The presence or absence of partisan conflict in Washington sends signals about a bill's ideology that these political sophisticates can use to evaluate the legislation. They will infer that bills favored by Democrats are liberal, that bills favored by Republicans are conservative, and that bills generating heated conflict between the parties are ideologically extreme. Whereas compromise between the parties would signal the bill's moderate nature, intense debate signals that the legislation is either so

liberal or so conservative (depending on which party proposed it) that the parties are unable to find common ground.

Because these sophisticates form policy opinions on the basis of how closely the legislation aligns with their ideological preferences, the signal that a policy is ideologically extreme can indirectly affect their support for it. Few Americans favor ideological extremism. Most view themselves as moderates and say they would like to see more bipartisanship on Capitol Hill. When lawmakers instead produce partisan, ideologically extreme policies—or policies perceived as such—the public rejects them. In the aggregate, this rejection of extreme legislation results in the well-known thermostatic response—public calls for conservatism when the government produces policies that are too liberal and calls for liberalism when the government produces policies that are too conservative (Wlezien 1995). At the individual level, Americans also reject policies they believe are out of step with their own ideological preferences. Only individuals with views that are similarly extreme will favor bills they believe fall at the outskirts of the ideological spectrum.

In this way, the presence or absence of conflict indirectly shapes the policy opinions of those who are more politically sophisticated by influencing their placement of the legislation on the left/right ideological spectrum. For instance, suppose a Democratic bill is introduced in Congress that would increase public school funding. If the bill generated partisan conflict, strong liberals would place it closer to themselves (at the far left of the ideological spectrum) because the controversy would suggest to them that the bill is extremely liberal. Given the perceived congruence between their own preferences and the content of the bill, strong liberals would be more inclined to support the bill under such circumstances than they would if the bill generated bi-partisan support. Conservatives and moderates, on the other hand, would be less likely to support the bill if it generated controversy than they would if it received bi-partisan support. This is because the heated debate would similarly suggest to them the extremely liberal nature of the bill. Ultimately, the closer an ideologically-minded individual places a bill to him or herself on the ideological spectrum, the more likely he or she will be to support it.

Fig. 1.5 illustrates this concept visually. The top portion of the figure represents the beginning of the policy debate—time one (T_1). At this point, there has been little partisan debate. Members of the public simply know that a Democratic education bill has been introduced in Con-

T_1 ←———|■■■■■■■■■■■|∘∘∘∘∘∘∘|—|———————→
$\quad\quad\quad$ |$\quad\quad\quad\quad\quad\quad\quad$ B $\quad\quad$ I_1 $\quad$ M
$\quad\quad\quad I_2$

T_2 ←———|■■■■■■■|∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘∘|—|—————————→
$\quad\quad\quad$ |$\quad\quad\quad\quad\quad$ B $\quad\quad\quad\quad$ I_1 $\quad$ M
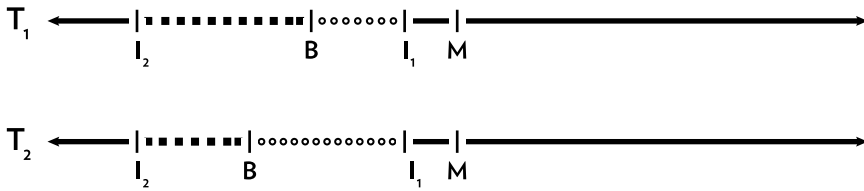$\quad\quad\quad I_2$

FIG. 1.5. Bill Placement on an Ideological Scale.

gress that would increase federal K-12 funding. Because the bill (B) is a Democratic one, members of the public have placed it to the left of the median (M) on the left/right ideological spectrum. This placement puts the bill fairly close to individual one (I_1), a left-leaning moderate, and relatively far from individual two (I_2), a strong liberal.

As the debate over the legislation spans weeks and months, members of the public hear more and more about the partisan conflict in Washington. They learn from the news media that the Democrats are battling the Republicans in Congress for passage of the bill. Using this information, individuals update their placement of the bill on the ideological spectrum. The result of this updating is shown in the bottom portion of fig. 1.5, which represents time two (T_2). Here, the bill is placed farther to the left than it was in time one. Because of its association with heated partisan debate, the public views the bill as being more ideologically extreme, which, in the case of this Democratic bill, means more liberal. The location of the bill is now farther from our left-leaning moderate (I_1) and closer to our strong liberal (I_2). Based on the updated placement of the bill, we should expect individual one to like the bill less than he did before the heated debate began, and individual two to like the bill more.

The Dual Influence of the Conflict Frame

In sum, the conflict frame is expected to influence policy attitudes in two ways, which are summarized by fig. 1.6. First, the conflict frame can affect policy attitudes directly, through the associative process described. When policies are linked in people's minds with negative concepts like partisanship and divisiveness, these concepts become part of the mix of information that is aggregated across in the formation of an overall attitude toward the policy. In this way, these associations can depress
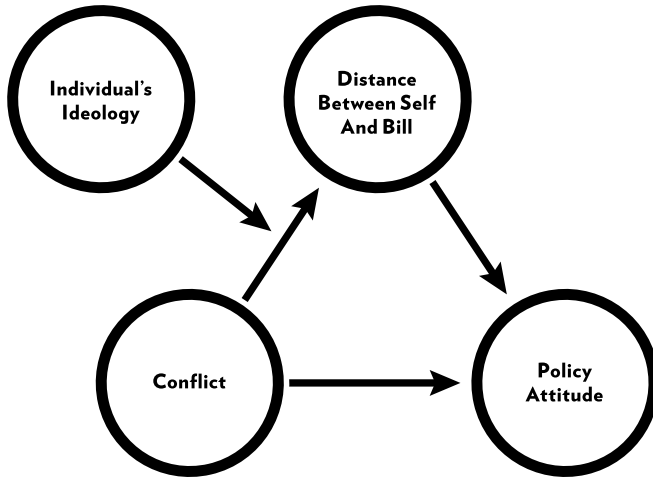
FIG. 1.6. Direct and Indirect Influence of Conflict on Policy Opinion.

support for policies at the center of a political battle. This direct effect should be most prevalent among individuals with weak preexisting policy preferences and those who know less about politics.

The conflict frame can also influence policy attitudes indirectly by altering the perceived distance between the individual and the bill on the ideological spectrum. The interaction between the individual's ideological self-placement and the ideology of the bill determines whether the association of a bill with partisan debate causes the individual to place the bill closer to or further from him or herself. But note that in the aggregate, the signal that a bill is ideologically extreme will have a negative net effect on support for it because few Americans place themselves at either extreme of the ideological spectrum. This indirect effect should be most prevalent among politically knowledgeable individuals with strong, ideologically based policy preferences.

Both of these reactions to policies associated with an adversarial lawmaking process are distinct from reactions based on partisan attitudes toward specific policies. This is not because the conflict frame does not highlight the partisan nature of legislation—it does. Reports that focus on conflict in Washington naturally emphasize partisan divisions because the two sides of the debate are typically the Democrats and the Republicans. Highlighting this divide provides a useful signal for partisans—clearly indicating which side of the issue their team is on. We

might expect this cue to generate increased support among members of the party that proposed the legislation, decreased support among members of the opposition party, and to have no impact on independents. But the influence of the conflict frame goes beyond these party cues—depressing policy support across the board. I will demonstrate that, while the frame's influence is often strongest among members of the opposition party, independents are also less likely to support policies associated with conflict, and so are members of the party that proposed the divisive legislation. This makes the conflict frame a powerful rhetorical weapon that opponents can use to chip away at public support among members of the proponent's own party.

Whether its impact is direct or indirect, the news media's frequent use of the conflict frame is expected to systematically shape public policy opinion. Policies that are associated with heated partisan debate should garner less public support than they would otherwise. Further, the larger and longer the debate, the more precipitous the decline in support. This means that obstruction and timing are important, as slowing things down to extend the debate will predictably heighten support for the status quo. But this is only because the corrosive effect of the conflict frame leads to declining support for policies whose substantive goals may have broad and unchanging public support. In fact, opponents of a piece of legislation may focus their objections on the lawmaking process itself, claiming, for instance, that the bill is being pushed through Congress with parliamentary maneuvers that limit minority party input. Such arguments bypass the substance of the law altogether, focusing public attention on the strategic, combative elements of lawmaking that the public dislikes. This framing makes the legislation seem ideologically extreme and politically motivated.

Structure of this Book

Chapters 2 through 6 systematically test the hypotheses outlined here. Chapter 2 addresses the fundamental claim that the conflict frame's use is widespread in public affairs reports. Unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on the frame's use in campaign coverage, my analysis in chapter 2 reports about policy proposals and the societal problems those proposals seek to address. It relies on an original dataset of full-text articles published in the *New York Times* between 1980 and 2010

and employs content analysis to assess the degree to which the conflict frame is used therein. Whereas political blogs, talk radio shows, and cable news reports are known to highlight conflict (and even to generate it) (Sobieraj and Barry 2011), elite newspapers should be less likely to do so. The *New York Times*, in particular, is an elite newspaper with an established readership and a staff of highly trained journalists. As such, it should be among the news outlets that are least likely to exploit political conflict for a boost in readership. If there is widespread use of the conflict frame in *NYT* reports, its use is likely widespread throughout the news industry.

I find that descriptions of conflict are ubiquitous in policy-focused news reports. Seventy percent of the policy-focused articles sampled contained descriptions of parliamentary tactics, political strategies, partisan debate, or heated confrontations between political elites. Forty-nine percent contained descriptions of two or more of these contentious aspects of the policy-making process. In contrast, just 32% of reports were focused on the substantive details of policies under consideration. Moreover, articles that describe pending legislation seldom give significant attention to the societal problems these proposals were meant to ameliorate. Policy problems and solutions are typically discussed separately. And unlike policy-focused articles, fewer than 20% of the articles that focus on societal problems highlight conflict. Instead, the majority of these articles focus on the substance of the problem. When problem-focused articles are embellished to add interest, it is typically with descriptions of the individuals and communities affected by particular problems.[5]

Articles that discuss societal problems could be framed in terms of conflict and, in fact, some are. A small subset of the problem-focused articles outlined debates over the causes and severity of social ills like poverty and homelessness, discussing who is responsible for these problems and who ought to fix them. But far more often, debate and conflict were not part of the dialogue about societal problems until the discussion entered the arena of government action. Once within that arena, the conflicts highlighted were, most often, those of a political nature. This pattern of news coverage, which uncouples problems and solutions, helps to explain American's negative perceptions of policy debate. Because news reports do not focus on the link between policy proposals and the problems they are designed to redress, conflict over public policy does not seem to be aimed at problem solving. Instead, proposals that are heavily

debated seem designed to advance political goals because they are described in terms of their role in a larger partisan conflict.

The rest of the book focuses on the effects of this framing on public policy opinion. Chapter 3 uses two experiments (one with student data and one with a national sample) to assess the impact of the conflict frame on individual-level policy support. In both experiments, study participants read a short vignette describing a proposed education policy. The vignettes were modeled after real *New York Times* articles and each includes identical information about the substance of the policy. All of the vignettes also describe the particular elements of the bill about which Republicans and Democrats disagree. The treatments differ in their descriptions of the tenor of the debate—the "conflict" treatments describe the process as a "partisan brawl" while the "civil debate" treatments describe lawmakers working to resolve their differences.

The experimental design is particularly useful because it allows me to compare support for a partisan proposal with support for a bipartisan one. In the real world, bipartisan proposals typically receive little news coverage and are rarely the subject of polling questions, making it hard to measure support for them with observational data. However, bipartisan bills are quite common on Capitol Hill. In chapter 6, I show that from 1981 to 2012, there were just as many major enactments passed with overwhelming bipartisan support as with slim partisan majorities. The experiment allows me to assess how members of the public would respond to these bipartisan enactments if they knew more about them.

Both experiments show that policies associated with heated conflict are viewed as more ideologically extreme than are identical policies not associated with heated conflict. Further, the perceived distance between the bill's ideology and the participant's ideology is a significant predictor of policy support—especially among political sophisticates. The further these participants placed the bill from themselves on a seven-point ideological scale, the less likely they were to support it. This finding provides evidence of the indirect effect of conflict on policy support; however, even when controlling for this ideological component, support for the policy is lower among participants given one of the "conflict treatments." The presence of heated debate does more than just send a signal about the relative extremism of the policy under consideration. It also signals dysfunction in the political process. This signal is particularly consequential for individuals who are *not* political sophisticates. Using the national sample (which comes from the 2012 Cooperative Congres-

sional Election Study), I find that individuals with lower levels of political knowledge are the most susceptible to the influence of the conflict frame when estimates of the bill's ideology are controlled for. These individuals dislike policies associated with conflict, regardless of their substantive provisions. In the remainder of the book, I focus primarily on this direct effect of conflict on policy attitudes.

The results of the experiments provide support for my theory but they leave questions about generalizability and external validity unresolved. To address these questions, I employ a quasi-experimental design in the fourth chapter to supply evidence from the "real word" that bolsters the experimental findings. Here, I examine support for the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA) in 2004 and 2005—a period during which fifteen states considered ballot measures on constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Residents of those states found themselves at the center of an emotionally charged debate and were the targets of well-funded campaigns vying for ballot measure votes. Residents of states without such campaigns encountered demonstrably less debate about gay marriage. This allows for a comparison of attitudes toward the FMA among residents of states experiencing high versus low levels of political conflict.

Using national survey data collected in March of 2004 and April of 2005, I show that support for the FMA fell markedly in ballot-measure states but remained stable in other states over the course of the debate. In fact, results from a logit model show that support for the FMA fell among residents of ballot measure states even when controlling for the respondents' underlying attitudes toward the legalization of gay marriage (the crux of the policy's substantive provisions). Further analysis shows that support for and opposition to the legalization of gay marriage remained constant over the same period. Residents of ballot measure states did not become more tolerant of same-sex marriage over time. Instead, they became increasingly frustrated with a divisive policy that they began to view as a politically motivated, wedge issue.

Unlike the case of gay marriage described in chapter 4, many of the policy debates that capture public attention center on proposed laws that are complex and multifaceted. Health care reform is just such a complex issue, one that has appeared on the political agendas of almost every president to serve since the end of the Second World War. In chapter 4 I develop two parallel health policy case studies. The first focuses on the failed Clinton health care reforms and the second focuses on the Obama

health care reforms. I examine how the debates were respectively portrayed in the press, and the disconnect between the public's support for the substance of the two bills and its opposition to the reform packages as a whole.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to show that in both cases, the media's focus on the contentious lawmaking process led many members of the public to believe legislators were pursuing their own political interests rather than the public good. I then examine the factors that shaped public opposition to both policies in detail using national survey data. Regression results show that for individuals with lower levels of political sophistication, the belief that lawmakers were "playing politics" dramatically increased the likelihood of opposition to both the Clinton plan and the Affordable Care Act. These findings are robust even when controlling for partisanship and attitudes toward the main substantive provisions of the two bills.

In chapter 6, I ask how the news media and public respond when the policy-making process is a *bi*partisan one. I provide evidence of a clear selection effect in which reporters devote roughly five times more coverage to important laws enacted by a slim majority as compared with those enacted by a large, bipartisan coalition. Further, I use aggregate-level survey data to show that nearly unanimous enactments are more popular with the public than are contentious laws. Finally, I show that contentious policies typically shed supporters over time using aggregate-level survey data.

The findings provided in chapters 2 through 6 show that conflict between lawmakers and the media's portrayal of that conflict depresses public support for policies with popular substantive provisions. They also raise questions about the relationship between media coverage, policy debate, and the public's attitude toward the government itself. The news media systematically focus their attention on policies that generate controversy among elites and frame that coverage as a competition between lawmakers. Policies that are equally important and widely popular (among politicians and members of the public) receive scant coverage. This selection effect leaves citizens with a distorted view of their government. The widespread use of the conflict frame means that Americans are all too aware of disagreements between lawmakers, but receive little information about the many instances of compromise and cooperation on Capitol Hill. I explore the relationship between contentious debate, policy support, trust in government, and presidential approval in the concluding chapter.