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Crisis elections and the primacy of policy: explaining media framing of election coverage

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Abstract

Media coverage of elections in Europe and North America has increasingly tended to focus on the horse-race and the campaign as a game rather than the policy debate pertinent to the election. This is often explained by the changes in media pressures. It may also make sense given the narrowing of policy space between left and right and the comparative prosperity enjoyed in Europe and North America. But the relevance of politics varies. The economic crisis in the west might have led to an increased interest in policy among voters and focus on it by media. Ireland experienced both extremes of boom and crisis between the late 1990s and 2011. The Irish case allows us use a quasi-experimental approach to test the impact of crisis on media framing of elections. This article uses original data from Ireland's last three elections, and with a design that shows when other pertinent variables are held constant, we find empirical support for the theoretical expectation that the context of the election affects the relative focus on campaign or horserace versus substantive policy issues.

Introduction

In the 2010 UK election the *Financial Times* (FT) was concerned that the campaign coverage had focussed too much on personality and not enough on substance (*Financial Times* May 3 2010). Given that voters get much of their information about parties during election campaigns, and that most of voters' exposure to a campaign comes mediated through the press, radio or television we would expect the result of this perception to be that voters are primed to consider personality or character traits over policy issues. The implication of the FT's point is that voters risk making misjudgements because their focus is on the wrong criterion for their vote.

Democracy for many has been under threat – by elite domination (Mosca 1923), market control and resource inequalities (Pierson 1992), and a lack of competence on the part of citizens (Sniderman 1993: 219). For some time many have been concerned about the ability of democracy to be subverted by poor quality debate. Plato, in the *Gorgias*, worried that the ignorant masses could be easily misled by skilled rhetoricians. Democracy, to work, needed citizens to focus on rational arguments (although Plato doubted that ordinary citizens could). If we assume citizens are potentially competent to govern themselves, they might depend on access to information and the ability to observe relevant debate.

Many, such as Keane (1993), see that a good quality public service media and a plurality of media outlets are essential to the proper functioning of democracy. If media are covering the 'wrong' aspects of electoral campaigns then there is a significant problem. For instance Cappella and Hall Jameison (1997) found that the media fuel public cynicism in politics through the way they cover politics, a position supported by other observers (Fallows 1997; Downie Jr. and Kaiser 2002; Patterson 1994). Cappella and Hall Jameison specify the type of coverage they worry about as game-framed coverage; that is, coverage that frames political debate as a game played between politicians and not one in which important policy

issues are debated. They argue that the media's focus on the 'game' of politics to the detriment of the substance of policy issues is at the root of voter cynicism and disengagement. It might also be of less use to voters in making an informed choice in elections. Because of the predominance of game-framed coverage, voters tend to be much better informed about a candidate's or a party's electoral prospects than about their policy positions, with vote choice then also being driven by perceived viability, i.e. backing a winner, rather than choosing according to issue preferences (Iyengar 1990; Bartels 1988).

If this is a problem, it might also be one that is getting steadily worse. One of the main arguments for why the media have moved towards covering politics as a game is due to commercial pressures (Patterson 2000). Competition between the press and broadcast media might have caused a shift to focus on campaign events and stories at the expense of substantive policy issues. News in the form of storying telling is cognitively easier to understand (Westin 2007; Lakoff 2008) and consumption of serious news has declined vis-à-vis softer forms. According to Iyengar and McGrady (2007: 62) writing about the US 'no matter what the medium, the public affairs content of the news has been diluted'. More recent changes, including the advent of free sheets (newspapers usually handed out at transport hubs of urban areas) and free access to internet news sources sees newspapers compete for fewer paying readers. The 24-hour news-cycle might increase the pressure on news outlets to produce copy, reducing the time journalists have to make considered judgements on policy issues (Conboy 2011: 99).

In this article we accept that any move towards game-oriented coverage of election campaigns may be in part due to commercial pressures and changes in medium, especially as the internet changes how and how quickly news can be gathered and disseminated; but political factors will also matter. Any move to game-framed coverage may also be caused by the

tightening of the policy space and the relative prosperity many western democracies enjoyed from the 1950s. But is there a unidirectional trend toward 'dumbing down' or softer forms of news? Or is it rather a matter of variation in how elections are treated by the media, and if so what might cause this variation?

The context in which an election takes place must surely matter. We make the proposition that when an election takes place at a time of crisis; that is, when there is a clear policy problem that people are concerned about, the media revert to a more issue or policy-based debate. The economic crisis in Europe offers an opportunity to test this. Using original data we study the case of Ireland, which after its 2007 election suffered a severe economic shock that ultimately saw the country enter an external support programme backed by the IMF, the ECB and the EU in November 2010. The external intervention caused the fall of a government and early elections. We study how the print media covered that 2011 'crisis' election and look at how it compares with other recent elections held against a buoyant economic backdrop. We find that the press focus is related to how important policy is to voters and to the sense of crisis in the country. The conclusion we draw is more positive than that which other scholars have, in that we find that in elections that truly matter, the media perform its duty. The idea of a 'crisis' election or that elections vary in importance for a country is also useful. This allows us to discover other variables, such as economic growth or war, that can explain variation in the media approach to politics.

In the following section we discuss how we might explain variation in media coverage of elections. We consider a number of independent variables that might be influential. After offering a short description of the case, looking at the context of Irish elections in the between 1997 and 2011 we then set out our research design, in which by comparing three Irish elections, we can hold all but one of these variables constant. After

discussing the data collection we present our findings and conclude with a discussion.

Explaining variation in election coverage

There are many ways of measuring how elections are covered in campaigns. One is to look at the amount of coverage elections are given as a percentage of total space (McMenamin et al. 2012). Another is to look at the ratio of soft news to hard news, however defined (Scott and Gobetz 1992). A third way is to look at the relative attention to episodic (stories) compared to thematic (general) frames (Iyengar 1991). Possibly the most commonly used ways to distinguish between types of news coverage is to look at policy-focussed news and that which relates to the game of politics (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997; see also Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012 for a comprehensive review of literature on strategy and game frames in political coverage). Strömbäck and van Aelst (2010) understand 'the game' to refer to the 'strategy of political campaigning,…the horserace and battle for voters,…the images of politicians…political power as a goal in and of itself, or…politicians and persons rather than as spokespersons for certain policies' (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010: 48) (see codes 130, 140 and 150 in Appendix One).

Modern election coverage is both a political and a media phenomenon. Therefore, it is expected that variation in election coverage is a function of both media and political variables. The first media factor is commercial pressure. Some scholars argue that the increasing commercialisation of the media explains the increasing focus on the game (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010). Media outlets should find it easier to generate advertising revenue and attract audience share/ readers by covering politics as a game; an exciting contest, akin to a sporting contest, with heroes and villains, rather than policy debates, filled with jargon, statistics, and caveats. For instance the recent US debate on 'Obamacare' could be approached in two ways: the media could cover the substance of the debate

on health policy or they could discuss the strategic game of how likely it is that the policy will succeed, in terms of being passed. The greater the pressure to generate profits, the more likely the media is to cover politics as a game. In electoral contexts the game frame might treat elections as a 'horse race', where the audience is interested in who is winning, losing or, who has fallen at a hurdle (such as a political scandal), rather than looking at the substantive issues at stake in the campaign. Elections are especially easy to cover as a game because there is an eventual winner. They are analogous to sports events in many ways – some electoral contests are foregone conclusions and so less interesting whereas some are competitive and hence exciting affairs. Media outlets can drive this coverage by encouraging or commissioning certain campaign events. Some campaign events, such as leader debates or opinion polls, facilitate commercially-driven media to game-frame election coverage. So we should see that when leader debates are introduced, game-framing of election coverage increases.

The second media factor is professional norms. In some media systems and outlets professionalism is defined as an absence of partisan bias (for instance the BBC), while in others professionals should be politically engaged, and ideologically motivated (for instance Fox News). In reporting substantive policy debates journalists struggle to remove their own values, and their analysis almost inevitable involves some judgement on the desirability of the policies in question. Where a norm exists against partisanship we are most likely to see elections portrayed as a game, as this makes it easier to avoid the appearance of favouring one side over another (Hallin 1994: 25). Those who strive to avoid accusations of bias might concentrate instead on the likelihood of the policy being passed. The decline of political parallelism in newspapers and the spread of professional norms of objectivity can be used to explain the increasingly game-oriented framing of elections.

Political variables appear to be somewhat less prominent in the literature on election coverage. Nonetheless, they should have substantial effects on media framing of elections. First, the basic institutional structure makes a difference to the nature of elections and should therefore influence how the media portray them. In consensual political systems, many actors, partisan, institutional, and civil society, have an important role in policy-making. By contrast, in majoritarian democracies decisions tend to be centralised in an executive controlled by one party. In consensual countries, elections more rarely lead to a clear turnover in power. Indeed, it is often policy-oriented coalition negotiations, rather than elections, that bring about shifts in power. On the other hand, in majoritarian systems, elections can transfer power to a totally different set of actors. Therefore, election coverage in majoritarian elections is likely to be much more game-oriented as elections usually have clear winners and losers. Lawrence (2000) hypothesises a related explanation based on the decision-making capacities of different political institutions. She finds in her case study of US welfare reform in the mid-1990s that the game frame should be more likely where there is policy conflict with a clear 'winner'.

The available evidence, such as it is, strongly favours this hypothesis. Kaid and Strömbäck (2008: 424) summarise existing research on election coverage in twenty countries. While acknowledging differences in the source case studies, they identify the type of coverage as game, policy, or mixed for 17 of the 22 countries covered. Of these in only one (the Netherlands) are substantive issues dominant and then in just two more (Japan and Sweden) do we see issues dominate coverage in the press, but not in the broadcast media (see Table 1).

Using empirical work that classifies regimes as predominantly consensual or majoritarian (Lijphart 1999: 248; McMenamin 2004: 269) we can see if there is a systematic difference according to political decision-making

structures.[1] Coding game as zero, mixed as one, and policy as two, the mean for majoritarian states is 0.1, while for consensual states it is 0.86 (see Table 1). This difference is statistically significant (one-tailed t-test, p=0.0039).

Table 1 about here

Our second political variable is more prominent in the literature. It has been argued that a narrowing of the terms of political competition has pushed election coverage towards the game-frame (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010; Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009). The narrower the ideological and policy differences between parties, the more the game frame will dominate. Many argue that there has been a shift towards valence competition in recent decades. Parties and voters agree on the ends of politics. Parties compete only in terms of performance in achieving these ends (Stokes 1963; Green 2007). This is usually interpreted as resulting in a focus on the characteristics of leaders and politicians, rather than policy choice.

A third political variable could be the competiveness of a specific election. A competitive election is more exciting and easier to characterise in game terms, so we would expect that close elections or those with uncertain outcomes will have more game-oriented coverage. To date the literature offers only mere speculation instead of analysis on this question (Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008) which may be because measuring closeness across countries is not always straightforward. While in countries with plurality electoral systems and two-party systems we can measure it as

[1] Consensual regimes score below the mean on Lijphart's executive-parties dimension. We coded South Africa as relatively majoritarian and Bulgaria as relatively consensual. Bulgaria has a multi-party system; has usually had coalition governments; governments have been relatively short-lived governments, including caretaker cabinets; most seats are filled by proportional representation; and the interest group system is weak. Democratic South Africa has been dominated by one party; has had single-party, dominant governments; the electoral system is proportional; and the interest group systems has corporatist aspirations but is quite fragmented.

the difference between the top two parties, in proportional representation systems competiveness is not so easily quantified. The parties may not appear to balance on a knife edge, but possible coalition outcomes might. Also elections may be close for a number of different reasons, some related to the other independent variables. To test it we would need to use multivariate analyses, not available to us here.

Our final political variable is the type of election. Reif and Schmitt (1980) noting different voting behaviour in elections to the European Parliament compared to national elections, conceived the first-order and second-order election models. First and second order elections are usually distinguished in terms of the importance of the office being elected. Where the election is important, that is to the primary policy-making institutions, voters are thought to concentrate on the intrinsic choice at stake in the election. In second-order elections voters are less concerned by the formal focus of the election but instead use it to, perhaps, express dissatisfaction with the government or signal to the government the wish to move in a certain policy direction. Second-order elections tend to have lower turnout while smaller parties do well and government parties do worse than we would otherwise expect.

In distinguishing electoral contests in this way elections to the same office in the same country, e.g. elections to the US Presidency or UK general elections, are essentially invariable. However, elections to the same office within a country are more important at some times than at others. We might consider that an election at a time of 'crisis' in a country is an election that matters more – one where the population needs to make a choice between two policy paths. This contrasts with elections that take place during periods of contentment. We can then think of the crisis election as a first-order election, where we expect to see higher turnout, reflecting a greater interest and engagement in the substantive issues facing the electorate at that time. Elections in periods of contentment, by

contrast, should generate lower turnout and focus on extraneous issues. More to the point we have expectations about media coverage. Certain policy issues are nearly always important, for instance the economy, but only at times are these issues regarded as important *problems* (see Wlezien 2005). When issues can be conceived of as problems facing society and when those problems are great, then we might see a greater policy focus by politicians and policy interest from the general public. When society faces crucial choices on issues that are of fundamental importance to people's lives, the electorate will demand more serious policy debate from competing politicians. They will also expect that the media reflect this serious debate in their electoral coverage. Thus we hypothesise that:

> *Everything else being equal media frames of elections will become more policy-focussed during periods of crisis.*

One might argue that the type of election variable and policy space variable are correlated. The policy space might normally widen in a crisis. If the status quo is unsustainable, political actors, the media, and election debates are forced to imagine new alternatives, question their own previous assumptions, and consider major choices. However, crises can also narrow policy options. For instance in the case of a military invasion or attack, events may remove other policy options as acceptable courses of action.

The context of the 2011 Irish general election

Ireland in 2002, 2007 and 2011 represent interesting contrasts, though the elections were to fill the same offices and broadly the same parties contested them. The 2002 and 2007 elections can be regarded as contented elections, whereas in 2011 the country was clearly experiencing a crisis. The election in 2011 was called before the parliamentary term had finished because the government's teetering majority finally fell as a result of the intervention of the IMF and Ireland's entry into an external

programme to fund the Irish state. The election was the third most volatile in terms of changes in party support in post-war European history and the most volatile in which no new party emerged (Mair 2011).

Ireland had up to 2008 enjoyed the epithet 'Celtic Tiger' as its economy had grown at remarkable rates from 1997 to 2007. Unemployment had fallen to close to four per cent; employment had doubled; and Ireland, traditionally a country of emigration, saw its population rise through a combination of high immigration and high fertility rates. While growth in the early part of the so-called Tiger period were caused by a significant inward-investment boom and a strengthening of the domestic economy, after 2002 the high rates of property-price growth fed consumer-led growth that was ultimately unsustainable. Irish banks in particular fed the property bubble through lax lending funded by cheap credit available on international money markets. The very weak regulation of those banks became apparent in late 2007 during the 'credit crunch'. The weakening position of the Irish banks came to a head in September 2008 when they could not access money on the financial markets to service their debts, and their loan-books were increasingly troubled as more and more loans were defaulting. On being told that a bank was with a day or two of collapsing, the Irish government guaranteed the debt of Irish banks. It believed that the banks were solvent but suffering from a short-term liquidity problem. In fact the banks were insolvent and the €70bn bank rescue was the result of what was, given the size of the country, the biggest banking failure in world financial history.

At the same time Irish tax revenues were falling dramatically. Irish governments had increased state spending in the previous ten years, and were now under pressure to reduce this quickly. A number of emergency budgets followed that reduced government spending, but the deficit in Ireland remained stubbornly high at about ten per cent of GDP. Between 2008 and 2011 real GNP declined by 11.9 per cent. General government

debt increased from 25 per cent of GDP in 2007 to 107 per cent of GDP in 2011. Between 2000 and 2007 the unemployment rate averaged 4.5 per cent. This increased substantially, estimated at 14.4 per cent in 2011. Although Ireland had seen recessions before, particularly in the 1980s, none had seen as sharp a drop in economic activity. We can see that if we are measuring the independent variable of election type as a dichotomy between crisis and contentment the three elections in 2002, 2007 and 2011 represent extreme cases.

Research design

In order to investigate whether the type of election – crisis or contentment – is a significant variable in explaining the framing of election coverage by media outlets we ideally want to compare a large number of elections, in a number of countries where there is variation on this variable. There is a dearth of comparative research in political communications in large part because of the differences in coding (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). This means there is a lack of cross-nationally comparative data (Norris 2009). As a result meaningful comparison can often just be made at the within-country level. However, Wilke and Reinemann (2001) show how single-country cases can make a significant contribution to comparative research in political communications.

In this section, we analyse the Irish case in terms of the previous theoretical discussion. In doing so, we consider cross- and intra-case perspectives. We are able to demonstrate that the Irish case is a least-likely case for a policy framing of elections compared to many other countries. Moreover, we argue that the 2011 election was a least-likely case for policy-focussed coverage in all but one respect, that of the unprecedented crisis the Irish economy, polity, and society faced.

First, commercial pressures in the Irish newspaper business are very high. The Irish newspaper market is highly competitive. The press is small,

crowded and unsubsidised, and Irish-based newspapers must compete with Irish editions of British newspapers. Commercial pressure in 2011 was probably greater than any other point in the newspapers' history. Like newspapers elsewhere, Irish papers were losing circulation which fell by 22 per cent between 2007 and 2011. The economic crisis put much greater pressure on newspaper advertising revenues which fell by 56 per cent in the same period.[2] Thus sales have come to constitute a greater share of revenue. In particular, the papers very much shared in the Irish property bust. Some of the papers had become dependent on lucrative property supplements during the boom, and like the Irish State itself, faced a massive shortfall in revenue when the property market crashed. Even those papers that could turn a profit were saddled with large boom-era debts. These commercial pressures should have increased their incentive to reduce costs and sell more papers which the literature suggests can be achieved by framing the election as a game. Indeed, unprecedented numbers of opinion polls and leaders debates on TV in 2011 made it easier than ever for the papers to provide game-oriented coverage.

Second, Ireland reflects the liberal model of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004), which has a norm of impartial reporting and a rigorous distinction between 'hard news' and commentary. Papers are not now clearly associated with parties and seem to endeavour to contain a plurality of opinion. Indeed, there is very good evidence that Irish journalists do not generally express their political opinions through their reporting. Survey responses suggest that Irish journalists are much more (socially) liberal and (economically) left-wing than their paper's editorial stances and indeed Irish society in general (Corcoran 2004). We see no evidence to suggest that his variable is not constant across the three elections.

[2] Calculated from Audit Bureau of Circulation 2008 - 2011 and the advertising figures are IAPI Adspend/Nielsen Media Research 2008 – 2011.

Third, Ireland is not a consensual democracy. Lijphart places it on the border between consensus and majoritarianism, but Irish political scientists would argue that it is much closer to the Westminster model. In particular, the Irish executive is very much dominant, even outdoing the British exemplar in government domination of the legislature (O'Malley and Martin 2010). Admittedly, Ireland has had coalition governments in recent decades, but power is not shared with the opposition. Ireland has also given a significant role for interest groups, known as the 'social partners'. The system of social partnership largely collapsed as a result of the economic crisis, returning much power to the core executive. Generally, given the institutional structure Ireland has should see a tendency toward the game frame.

Fourth, Ireland is known for its non-ideological politics. While social and ideological patterns are discernable, they are subtle and apparently ephemeral compared with those in other established democracies (see Byrne and O'Malley 2012). Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, two pragmatic, conservative, nationalist parties, have dominated Irish politics since the 1920s. The small Irish Labour Party is one of the most centrist left-wing parties in Europe. At the national level, this ideological consensus makes Ireland a most likely case for game framing, as parties and leaders compete on valence issues. At the constituency level, the electoral system produces relatively candidate-centred competition, which focuses on the representation of local interests at the expense of national policy. It could be argued that Ireland's entry to the external funding programme in late 2010 reduced the scope for policy debate, as so little remained to be decided by the Irish political system. While many commentators and some politicians advocated rejection or renegotiation of the bailout deal, an analysis of the parties' manifestos shows no significant widening or contraction of the policy space (Suiter and Farrell 2011).

We have argued that Ireland was a least likely case for a policy-oriented framing of election coverage in 2011. The commercial pressure on newspapers, journalistic norms, pattern of democracy, and the nature of party competition all point towards a system in which elections are likely to be framed as a game. Moreover, these variables also point towards a more game-oriented coverage than in recent Irish elections, except for professional norms which are neutral. Table 2 summarises these arguments.

Table 2 about here

This brings us to the final variable, election type, or more specifically for this case economic crisis. The 2011 election clearly represents an 'extreme case' where the value observed in the independent variable being tested – the type of election – 'lies far away from the mean of a given distribution' (Gerring 2007: 101-102). The systemic crisis in Ireland points towards policy framing, both in comparison to Ireland's past, and previously studied elections in other countries because the policy choices Ireland faced seemed to matter more than ever. We can see that the crisis had an impact on people's vote choice. The proposed Taoiseach (prime minister) and the set of ministers were important criteria for 35 per cent of voters in choosing how to vote in 2007. This dropped to 20 per cent in 2011. Meanwhile the criterion of 'policies set out by the parties' increased from 25 per cent to 43 per cent over the two elections (Marsh and Cunningham 2011: 185).

Ireland's crash represents a natural experiment where we see a 'treatment' administered presenting itself as a sharp change in an independent variable in one point on a time-series (Gerber and Green 2008). We use a series of observations on the policy/ game dependent variable, and see if the 'treatment' of the financial crisis, leading to a crisis

election, caused an interruption to the dependent variable, while other potentially influential variables are held constant.

Cook and Wong (2008: 144) suggest 'the inclusion of an untreated control group with multiple observations, can help rule out plausible threats to validity'. There is no perfect control case because few countries share the same political and media systems. The UK might be a case that is as close as we can reasonably find. The UK has both relevant similarities and differences with Ireland. The UK, like Ireland, has a majoritarian political system. Both press markets are predominantly commercial and indeed many UK titles have Irish editions that take their style and tone from the British parent. To some extent Irish papers compete directly with UK rivals. But they differ in that UK papers tend to be associated with particular parties or have clear political leanings. Unlike in Ireland there are clear ideological differences between the parties, though these weakened since the 1990s. Crucially, however, while the economic crisis touched the whole world, its effects on the UK were much less than in Ireland. While unemployment increased, it did so by about three percentage points. Where Ireland suffered economic stagnation, cumulative GDP growth in the UK in the five years up to 2010 (when the election was held) was about 15 per cent (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010: 24). The economy was possibly a minor issue compared to the impact (in the media at least) of the political expenses scandal in the year preceding the 2010 Westminster election. We can look at the effect of the crisis on policy coverage in Ireland in 2011 and compare it to the coverage of 2010 UK election where no similar crisis took place.

Having outlined the research design, in the next section we describe the sources of the data, the coding scheme, sampling and inter-coder reliability tests.

Data

We coded newspaper articles from each of the official election campaigns in 2002, 2007 and 2011. In 2002, we undertook a content analysis of four newspapers (*Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner* and *Evening Herald*), while in 2007 five newspapers (the above plus the *Irish Sun*) were included. The analysis of 2011 election includes twelve national newspapers including Sunday broadsheets and tabloids. We coded all weekday issues throughout the short campaign, 25 April to 17 May in 2002, 30 April to 26 May in 2007, and all issues published from 2 February to 25 February, 2011. All articles from the news section, comment pages and editorials with reference to the election, the campaign, or political parties, were included and coded line by line. Letters to the editor, e-mails or extracts from web coverage, such as 'tweetwatch' were excluded. The coding did include reviews of TV programmes on the election, including leader debates. In 2011 a random number generator was used to select 40 per cent of the articles. This ensured that an even coverage of front-page and inside page articles was included in the sample.[3] This procedure was followed for each issue in each newspaper.

This resulted in a total of 1,217 articles from the 2002 election, 2,095 articles from 2007 and 1,440 articles from 2011. We used the same coding scheme in all three elections; in the following we focus on descriptive statistics from the 2007 dataset while detailed information about the 2002 dataset can be found in Brandenburg (2005) and details of coding of articles from the 2011 election can be found in McMenamin (2012). In 2002 and 2007 the unit of measurement is text segments within articles, measured in the amount of space it takes up. An individual text segment, of varying length, is defined by having a unique value on each of these variables. As soon as a different issue or party is introduced, a new text segment begins. In 2011 text segments were again used, but because much

[3] For the *Irish Independent*, the proportion of articles sampled and coded was 30 per cent and these were then weighted up. As this is among the largest papers in terms of length, this sample was sufficient to make reasonable comparisons with the other papers.

of the articles now came from electronic formats they are measured in terms of 'quasi-sentences' (see Budge et al. 2001). The quasi-sentence is defined as an argument. A single sentence can be broken down to the number of arguments, each coded as a single unit. Because coders will not necessarily agree on the number of units in an article we might be worried that this would affect our results. We tested to see if the two coders differed in the number of codes used, but there was no significant difference. In any case, as we analyse the proportion of coverage, not the raw number of units, we do not consider that this would bias our results. Because the unit of observation in 2002 and 2007 is of variable length, whereas in 2011 it is of a (reasonably) standardised length, we weight the 2002 and 2007 data by the size of the text.

We measured inter-coder reliability in a number of ways. For the 2007 data we randomly selected five articles from each newspaper for re-coding. This provided us with 919 units (text segments) for reliability testing. Using Krippendorff's alpha, regarded as a conservative measure for inter-coder reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002: 600), we find that for game-oriented codes levels of agreement are highest at .95 and .94 respectively, while for issue codes (see Appendix One), agreements are somewhat lower at .78 and .82 respectively. This is not surprising because of the larger range of values on those variables, but these findings compare well with other studies and fall into what would be considered by Krippendorff (1980) and Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998) as good quality data. In 2011 because the unit of analysis for our two coders was the quasi-sentence rather than the whole article, we sampled 26 articles to give us up to 501 units (quasi-sentences). For the 2011 sample the Krippendorf"s alpha was .93.

Results

There has been a steady increase in the volume of electoral coverage in Irish media over time (Farrell 1978; Bowman 1987). Though analysis of media coverage of elections before 2002 is patchy we have some data for the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, respectively the liberal 'newspaper of record' and a more populist and popular broadsheet (Farrell 1993, 1990). While the proportion of election coverage framed as policy decreased somewhat between 1973 and 1992 we see that the game frame has been increasing (see Table 3). This trend is consistent with the arguments made that there has been an 'Americanisation' of media across the world (Hallin and Mancini 2004). We can also see that there was some variation between newspapers. The *Irish Independent* had substantially more focus on the game than the *Irish Times* in the 1989 election for which we have data for both papers.

Table 3 about here

There is a gap in available data, with no coverage of the 1997 election, but our original data show that policy coverage continued on a steady downward trend in 2002 (see Table 4). That variation between the papers narrowed considerably in 2002 with the *Irish Times* framing its coverage in policy terms even less than the *Irish Independent*. The only tabloid included in 2002, the *Evening Herald*, carried much less policy coverage than any of the broadsheets. In 2007, we see a more dramatic decrease in policy coverage, in the broadsheets as well as the tabloid for which we have comparative data. This may have been because 2007 was a much closer election than in 2002, which was seen as something of a foregone conclusion. Across all papers policy-framed election coverage drops by between 10 and 15 points. In 2007 the *Irish Independent* carries as little policy coverage as the tabloids, as a proportion of each paper's election coverage.

Table 4 about here

So when it comes to the 2011 election what happens? Though all other variables point to no change or a continuing fall in policy coverage our theoretical expectation is that the sharp deterioration in the performance of the Irish economy will cause an increase in issue-framed coverage. This is what we see. The tabloids see a large rise in policy-framed coverage of the 2011 election – at almost 50 per cent for one (though it should be noted that the amount of coverage tabloids devote to election coverage was very small (McMenamin et al. 2012). The increase for the broadsheets is even greater (by between 20 and 30 points), so most election coverage was policy focussed in 2011.

If the much increased policy coverage in 2011 is related to the crisis then we expect that within the policy coverage, the subject of the crisis – the economy – would feature heavily. Voters clearly identify the economy as important in 2011. When asked the single most important issue or problem, 35.6 per cent mentioned the economic crisis and a further 13.5 per cent mentioned related economic issues, such as unemployment (Lansdowne/ RTÉ exit poll). Table 5 breaks down the election coverage in the three elections. We observe a large increase in the coverage of the economy from 5.3 per cent in 2007 to almost 20 per cent in 2011. Two-thirds of the articles that make any reference to the economy also explicitly refer to an economic crisis. When we make a direct comparison with just the newspapers coded in 2007 (final column in Table 5) we see a similar shift to policy-framed coverage. So this finding is not an artefact of the additional newspapers coded. Interestingly, the trend in game-framed coverage is not uniform. Coverage of the 'campaign' halves – from 40 per cent to less than 20 per cent – but the poll/ horserace coverage actually increases quite significantly. This may reflect the increase in opinion polling at the election. Despite this the overall policy-framed coverage is still substantially increased in 2011.

Table 5 about here

Another issue that voters mention relates to the political system. This was identified as the most important issue by 36.3 per cent of the electorate (Lansdowne/ RTÉ exit poll). This may seem surprising but there was a strong sense in Ireland that the political system had failed and needed to be reformed. This issue was given much greater prominence in the manifestos of all the main political parties (Suiter and Farrell 2011). This increased priority was reflected in newspaper coverage. The political system code rose from negligible levels in 2007 to account for almost 12 per cent of coverage in 2011. While we can see that the increase in policy focus by the press is reflected in the priorities of voters and presumably readers, our data can offer no hints as to any causal direction.

Because of the very high number of observations, even substantively uninteresting changes in coverage shown in Table 5 are statistically highly significant. We therefore use a more conservative test of whether changes are statistically significant where we take the percentage coverage of each newspaper for which we have data common across the 2007 and 2011 elections and conduct a two-tailed, paired t-test on the differences of the mean coverage over these elections. This makes for a much more strenuous test of difference, yet we still see that he following changes between 2007 and 2011 are statistically significant[4]: Political System (p. =0.00015), Economy (p.=0.0031), Campaigning (p.=0.0066), Polls/ Horserace (p.=0.011), Political Ethics (p.=0.0033) and Election (p.=0.0087, N is 5 for all). We can also see that the differences between 2002 and 2011 are significant; so 2007 is not an aberration.

[4] The means on which these differences are calculated are different to those in Table 5 as they are based on an average of the percentage coverage in at most five newspapers, which treats each newspaper equally. Table 5 is based on the coverage by article and as such gives more weight to those papers that are published daily and those that provide greater election coverage. As such we can be sure our results are not an artefact of unusual patterns in one or two newspapers. The patterns are similar to those seen in Table 5.

The Interrupted Time Series design allowed us to see if the link between the election type and the media coverage of elections is due to the 'treatment' of the massive economic shock. We also want to see if the case receiving the treatment varies from another control case. Table 6 shows the percentage of election coverage that is framed in policy issues in *The Irish Times* and the general UK press.[5] Ideally we would have two systems which are similar on all independent variables except the 'treatment' variable, in this case the crisis election. We then expect the two to track one another, except after the 'treatment'.

Table 6 about here

In fact the UK data show that election coverage there is more variable than it was in Ireland, which shows a steady downward trend. This could be because there is variation in the other independent variables we identify above. If we can generalise from so few data points, the UK seems to have slightly more policy-framed election coverage. This could be due to measurement differences or perhaps relates to the more 'political' nature of the press in the UK, where party-press parallelism is still high. The 1992 and 2010 UK elections are unusual in that they show falls from what otherwise would be an essentially flat line. The 1992 deviation might be explicable when we consider it was a closer election than any since 1979. In 2010 the introduction of leader debates transformed the campaign structure and given the performance of the third party leader in the first debate, transformed the campaign itself. The 2010 debates accounted for 12 per cent of front-page stories, compared to just three per cent on the economy. In any case the deviation in the UK data in 2010 goes in the same direction to that which Ireland had been going. The Irish election coverage in 2011 represents a strong divergence from the trend line. With the UK proportion of policy-framed coverage falling, we can confidently

[5] The UK data come from the 'Press' chapters in the 'British General Election of' series associated with David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh (Harrop and Scammell 1993; Scammell and Harrop 1997, 2002, 2005; Scammell and Beckett 2010).

conclude that Ireland was unlikely to have gone in the direction it did anyway. If anything, except for the economic crisis, making this a special election in Ireland, we would have expected to see a continued downward trajectory in the proportion of policy coverage. We can see that in this case, where all other variables would have predicted a more game-oriented election, the economic climate the election took place in – the type of election – had a very substantial impact on how election coverage was framed by the press.

Figure 1 about here

A second way we can make the link between election coverage and 'crisis' is by seeing if there is a link between the coverage and some observable measure of crisis. As we have data ranging back to 1973 for one Irish newspaper, we can test if that paper's coverage of election campaigns is associated with Ireland's economic performance. One objective measure of performance is the unemployment rate. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the two. The correlation coefficient for the unemployment rate in the election years for which we have election coverage data from *The Irish Times* is .82 (p.=.043, N=7). This shows there is a remarkably strong, positive relationship between unemployment and the level of policy coverage of elections by this newspaper.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the economic context of an election will be an important determinant of the way the media chooses to frame elections. Borrowing from the first and second-order election model we can conceive of some elections to the same office as more important than others at different times. Specifically we say that some elections take place in a climate of contentment and some in a sense of crisis. We expect the game

frame to be more common in 'contentment' elections, whereas there should be a greater emphasis on policy in crisis elections.

The 2002, 2007 and 2011 elections in Ireland provide useful cases where there was a sharp change in the importance of the election as a result of a dramatic change in the country's economic fortunes. It was a least-likely case where all other variables pointed to reduced policy coverage. The effect of election type was shown in dramatic fashion, and was consistent across different types of newspapers. Furthermore, we see that within the policy coverage, the press covers those areas related to the crisis.

This finding is of general interest to scholars of media and political communications. First it adds another, very powerful, variable to the list of explanatory variables used to explain media coverage of politics and in particular elections. The 1979 British General Election could be regarded as having taken place in an economic crisis, as would the 2012 Greek election. While it will often relate to economic performance, it should not be limited to it. There are other causes of an election being first order: a country newly in a state of war might judged by the electorate to be in a state of crisis. The 2001 and 2003 Israeli election that took place during the second Intifada would be a good example. Other types of crisis can also be identified, such as the 1994 and 1996 Italian elections that took place under the shadow of the *Tagentopoli* corruption allegations, which was a systemic crisis and saw the move from the First to Second Italian Republic. The actual performance might matter less than the comparison within the country to what had recently been experienced. Recessions might not appear to be as bad in a country which had previously only experienced slack growth. Northern Ireland had probably become immune to the semi-permanent conflict it experienced between the 1970s and 1990s. Crisis or contentment is in the eye of the beholder.

The second conclusion is a more general one on the nature of media coverage. This case shows that when it matters the media can shift focus quite dramatically and concentrate on policy. In a country that had shown evidence of the hypothesised 'dumbing down' of news coverage, we observe that in special circumstances that trend can be reversed and in a dramatic fashion. So we can have a less pessimistic outlook on the press than other commentators have had: the media can be responsive and responsible when required.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Patterns of Democracy and type of election coverage

Majoritarian	
US	Game
Australia	Game
Brazil	Game
UK	Game
Canada	Game
France	Game
Greece	Game
Mexico	Game
South Africa	Game
Spain	Mixed
Consensual	
Sweden	Mixed
Bulgaria	Mixed
Germany	Game
Israel	Mixed
Japan	Mixed
Netherlands	Policy
Poland	Game

Sources: (Lijphart 1999; McMenamin 2004; Kaid and Strömbäck 2008)

Table 2: Summary of theoretical expectations and the Irish case

Media variables	**Hypothesised effect**	**Irish value**	**Prediction**
Commercial pressure	Game	Intense commercial pressure; more spending on opinion polls	Game; cross- and intra-nationally
Norms against partisan bias	Game	Strong non-partisan norms	Game; cross-nationally
Political variables			
Majoritarian democracy	Game	Majoritarian	Game; cross- and intra-nationally
Narrow policy space	Game	Very narrow in terms of party system; extremely narrow because of bailout.	Game; cross- and intra-nationally
Election-type	Policy	Unprecedented crisis	Policy; cross- and intra-nationally

Table 3: Campaign coverage *Irish Times* (*Irish Independent*) 1973-1992

Year	**Game (incl. personality traits, campaign issues)**	**Policy issues**	**Other (electoral facts, laws etc.)**
1973	37.5	59.2	3.3
1987	44.2	53.9	1.9
1989	46.0 (57.9)	52.0 (40.6)	2.0 (1.6)
1992	48.9	48.6	2.5

Source: Farrell (1993: 34; 1990: 39)

Table 4: Campaign coverage of substantive policy issues, 2002-2011

Year	Irish Times	Irish Independent	Tabloid	Examiner
2002	43.8	40.9	32.8 Herald	44.4
2007	30.7	24.3	21.6 Herald 24.0 Irish Sun 24.6 Daily Star	32.7
2011	57.4	51.7	48.9 Irish Sun 42.7 Daily Star	53.5

Table 5: Election coverage in 2002, 2007 and 2011, % of total coverage (point change since earlier election)

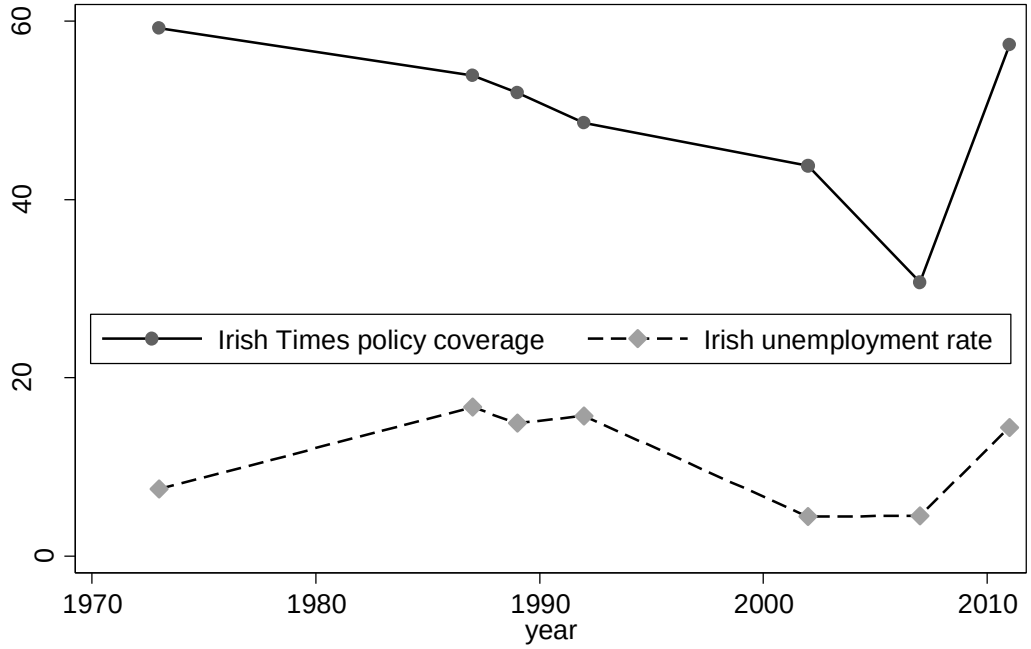
	2002	2007		2011 (all)		2011
Political System	2.7	0.9	(-1.8)	11.9	(+11)	11.3
Justice	4.0	1.8	(-2.2)	1.3	(-0.5)	1.3
Economy	8.5	5.3	(-3.2)	**19.8**	**(+14.5)**	**21.2**
Social Welfare	**9.6**	5.6	(-4.0)	5.0	(-0.6)	5.7
Other Policy	7.7	6.7	(-1.0)	7.6	(+0.9)	8.2
Country specific: Ireland	0.3	1.0	(+0.7)	1.2	(+0.2)	1.1
Campaigning	**37.0**	**40.4**	(+3.4)	**18.9**	**(-21.5)**	**19.1**
Polls/ Horserace	**16.0**	**10.0**	**(-6.0)**	**21.6**	**(+11.6)**	**20.4**
Leadership	2.2	5.3	(+3.1)	5.9	(+0.6)	4.3
Political Ethics	4.0	8.4	**(+4.4)**	2.6	(-5.8)	2.9
Non-political	0.6	0.2	(-0.4)	0.7	(+0.5)	0.5
Election	7.5	**14.4**	**(+6.9)**	3.0	(-11.4)	3.7
Number of articles	1,217	2,095		1,440		976
Number of newspapers (N)	4	5		12		5

The three most common types of coverage (biggest changes) are in bold. For details on statistical significance see text.

Table 6. Policy focus of media coverage of UK and Irish elections over time

Years	UK front pages	*Irish Times* coverage
1987	54	53.9
1989	no election	52.0
1992	39	48.6
1997	52	not available
2001/2002	57	43.8
2005/ 2007	56	30.7
2010/ 2011	35	57.4

Figure 1. Relationship between the Irish unemployment rate



Sources: Farrell 1993, 1990 and Central Statistics Office, Dublin.

Appendix 1: Summary of coding scheme

10 – Political System – incl. clientelism, women in politics, government control, effectiveness of public administration, electoral system and political reform

20 – Justice – incl. crime/ law enforcement, penal system, courts and judiciary

30 – Defence – incl. military spending, terrorism and intelligence

40 – Economy – incl. unemployment, taxation, banking, Euro, pay, business, competitiveness, property market

50 – Agriculture

60 – Social Welfare – incl. Health, pensions, social justice, social housing and social services

70 – Education – incl. education spending, religious control of schools

80 – Arts/Culture – incl. arts spending

90 – Infrastructure/Technology – incl. transport, regional development, science, broadband availability

100 – Environment – incl. energy and waste

110 – Foreign Affairs

120 – Country specific: Ireland – incl. Northern Ireland, traditional values

130 – Campaigning – incl. campaign diaries, stunts/ gaffes, campaign strategy, pledges (without describing policy), media coverage, party structure/ organisation, campaign finance

140 – Polls/Horserace – incl. opinion polls, candidate selection, leaders' debates (performance of leaders), likely composition of government/ outcome of election.

150 – Leadership – references to competence and performance of leaders

160 – Political Ethics – incl. corruption

170 – Non-political – references that are not political but contained in articles on the election

180 – Election – incl. turnout, exhortations to vote, descriptions of how voting system works, objective information, such as lists of candidates

190 – Locality-specific issue

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