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The impact of the economic crisis on media framing: Evidence from three elections in Ireland

Eoin O'Malley† Heinz Brandenburg‡, Roddy Flynn*, Iain McMenamin†, and
Kevin Rafter*

†School of Law and Government, Dublin City University

‡ School of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde

*School of Communications, Dublin City University

Abstract

Media coverage of elections in Europe and North America has increasingly focused on the campaign as a game rather than a policy debate. This is often explained by the changes in media pressures. It may also reflect 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 global economic crisis 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 to test the impact of the crisis on media framing of elections. This article uses original data from the three most recent national elections in Ireland, with a research design that holds other pertinent variables 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.

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Introduction

In the last few days of the 2012 US Presidential election 20 per cent of traffic to the New York Times website went to Nate Silver's blog analysing opinion polls (Tracy 2012). For some this was a trivialisation of an important decision that the nation was making (Gerson 2012). It reflected a mania for measurement that ignored the substance of the election. Poll analysis is usually thought of as treating an election or politics as a game or sport and is discussed in the same way. In this article we ask why do newspapers cover elections the way they do, and in particular what causes an emphasis on polls or electoral strategy as opposed to substantive policy?

It is a question that goes to the heart of democratic theory. Amartya Sen (1999) made the connection between the debates a country conducts and its social outcomes. He argues that democratic policy debate prevents famine and other disasters. Sen is not alone. Keane (1993) sees that a good quality public service media and a variety of media outlets are essential to the proper functioning of democracy.

If the media are covering the 'wrong' aspects of electoral campaigns then it might have a negative impact on the functioning of democracy. Cappella and Jamieson (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 Jamieson (1997) 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. This result is not conclusive as de Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that while framing in terms of strategy did increase cynicism, it did not affect turnout.

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 could have caused a shift to focus on campaign events and stories at the expense of substantive policy issues. 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 in urban areas) and free access to internet news sources, see newspapers competing for fewer paying readers. The 24-hour news-cycle increases 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 is 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 other factors, unrelated to media structure, will also be important. The social, economic and political context in which an election takes place must surely matter. We specifically argue that when an election takes place at a time of crisis – that is, when there is an unexpected negative change in some aspect of the state's affairs, which causes a debate on the failure and how the state might react – the media revert to more issue or policy-based coverage. The post-2008 economic crisis in Europe offers an opportunity to test this thesis. Using original data we study the case of Ireland, which from 2008 suffered a particularly severe economic shock that ultimately saw the country enter an external support programme in November 2010 backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Union (EU). 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 concept of 'crisis' elections and that elections vary in importance is also useful. This allows us to examine other variables, such as economic growth, or war, that can explain variation in the media approach to politics.

In the following sections we discuss how we might explain variation in media coverage of elections. We consider a number of independent variables that might be influential and we evaluate them in the Irish case. Looking at the context of Irish elections between 1997 and 2011 we then set out our research design, in which 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. 2013). 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 is to look at policy-focussed news and that which relates to the game of politics (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; see also Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012 for a comprehensive review of literature on strategy and game frames in political coverage). For instance, the debate in the US 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 become law. If indeed framing is the appropriate term, this is an example of 'emphasis framing' (Chong and Druckman 2007).¹ Strömbäck and van Aelst (2010: 48) 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.' More recently scholars have distinguished between the game frame

(which focuses on polls and who will win) and the strategy frame (which focuses on the motives and tactics of parties and candidates) (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012).

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. We discuss a range of such variables, not in order to provide definitive tests of their importance, but rather to demonstrate that omitted variable bias is a minor concern in our study of Ireland. The first media factor is commercial pressure. 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 sport, with winners and losers, rather than policy debates, filled with jargon, statistics, and caveats. 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 (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— 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.

An alternative hypothesis might be that media fragmentation means that those who had no interest in politics could easily avoid news coverage. This could allow newspapers [to](#) become more policy driven as they could target specific types of

readers who shared a policy outlook, and remain commercially competitive. We will deal with this possibility empirically below.

The second media factor is professional norms. In some media systems and outlets professionalism is defined in terms of an absence of partisan bias (for instance, the BBC), while in others professionals are less inclined to separate fact from opinion and give the need for balanced debate a lower priority (Fox News). In reporting substantive policy debates journalists might find it more difficult to remove their own values, and their analysis almost inevitably involves some judgement on the desirability of the policies in question (Cushion 2012). 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 where newspapers were linked to specific parties and the acceptance of professional norms of objectivity can explain the increasingly game-oriented framing of elections.

Though they should have substantial effects on election news coverage, political variables appear to be somewhat less prominent in the literature. First, the basic institutional structure makes a difference to the nature of elections and should therefore influence how the media portray them (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009). 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 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 strongly favours this hypothesis. The case-study literature clearly identifies majoritarian institutions with the game frame. Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2013) make a big step forward in leveraging two decades of political change in Bulgaria to show that two indicators of majoritarianism, the number of parties and the electoral system, can explain variations in newspaper framing of elections. Unfortunately, in most countries such basic variables vary little over time. Nonetheless, it is possible to undertake a preliminary cross-national test. Kaid and Strömbäck (2008: 424) summarise existing research on election coverage in 22 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).²

Table 1 about here

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.³ Coding game as zero, mixed as one, and policy as two, we can perform an ordinal logit to estimate coverage framing using a dummy variable for majoritarianism as the predictor. As Table 2 shows, the coefficient is in the right direction and significant at five percent, in spite of the small number of observations. We classified Bulgaria, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico qualitatively according to the criteria of Lijphart’s first dimension. If these are excluded the majoritarianism coefficient still explains much of the variation in framing and is significant at ten percent.

Table 2 about here

A second political variable is more prominent in the literature. It is often 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 are the ideological and policy differences between parties, the more the game frame dominates. Many argue that there has been a shift towards valence competition in recent decades (Clarke et al. 2004). Parties and voters agree on the ends of politics. Parties compete only in terms of the likelihood of 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 is the competitiveness 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 speculation rather than analysis on this question (Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008), perhaps 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 the difference between the top two parties, in proportional representation systems competitiveness is not so easily quantified. The parties' support may not appear balanced on a knife edge, but the possible coalition outcomes might.

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. While politicians almost invariably talk of ‘this’ election as one where a vital choice must be made, even within a country, elections to the same office vary in importance over time. An election at a time of crisis should matter more because the disorder caused by the crisis necessitates vital decisions. This contrasts with elections during periods of contentment where politicians might compete on who is best able to maintain and manage the status quo. It has been found that elections are better conceived on a continuum between first and second order (van der Eijk [et al.](#); [Franklin, and Marsh](#) 1996) and in the real world there is certainly no dichotomy between crisis or contentment. The level of a crisis or failure – when there are unexpected negative changes to the political, economic or social affairs of a state bringing uncertainty – will vary. When there is a great sense of crisis or system failure we expect that the election will be treated in a qualitatively different way by competing parties and the voters they aim to convince. The election will be about more than just the choice between the parties; it will be about policy choices. 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 for a discussion). When issues can be conceived of as problems facing society and when those problems are great, then we should see a greater policy focus by politicians and policy interest from the general public. As well as demand from the public driving a greater policy focus, which we regard as the main causal mechanism, parties may have less money to spend on marketing and so may have to rely on policy for attention. Similarly newspapers may have less money to spend on opinion polls.

We also have expectations about media coverage where there are these greater levels of uncertainty and disorder. The electorate will expect that the media reflect this debate in their electoral coverage to a greater extent than in a contentment election. This is consistent with Zaller's (2003) idea of a 'burglar alarm standard of news quality' in which he proposes that modern mass media cannot and need not be expected to provide high quality coverage of all relevant political events on a routine basis. Instead, he argues that soft-news coverage which emphasizes drama, the game and strategy frame, is appropriate for the coverage of 'non-emergency but important events' while the 'burglar alarm' will be rung and citizens be alerted 'to matters requiring urgent attention' (2003: 122). The concept of a crisis election constitutes a special case of this burglar alarm notion. We propose that, in a crisis, media coverage will shift from game and strategy frames that the media utilize to generate attention to a routine process to emergency coverage that refocuses on the political issue underlying the crisis.

Thus we hypothesise⁴ that:

Everything else being equal media frames of elections will become more policy-focussed during periods of unexpected negative change in economic, political or social affairs.

The context of the 2011 Irish general election

Elections to Dáil Éireann – the Irish parliament – in 2002, 2007 and 2011 represented interesting contrasts, though these contests were to fill the same offices and broadly the same parties contested. The 2002 and 2007 elections can be regarded as unusually contented elections, whereas in 2011 the country was dealing with the repercussions of a severe economic shock. The election in 2011 was called before the parliamentary term had finished as the incumbent government's majority ended due to Ireland's entry into an external funded programme. 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).

Up to 2008 Ireland had 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. Initial growth was caused by a significant inward-investment boom and a strengthening of the domestic economy but after 2002 ~~the~~ there was an unsustainable property boom. Irish banks fed the property bubble through lax lending funded by cheap credit available on international markets. The very weak regulation of those banks became apparent in late 2007 as the implications of the international 'credit crunch' impacted on the Irish financial sector. The situation came to a head in September 2008 when the Irish banks could not access money on the financial markets, and their loan-books were increasingly troubled as more loans defaulted. The Irish government guaranteed the debt of all Irish banks as it believed that they 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 fell dramatically. Irish governments had increased state spending in the previous decade, and were now under pressure to reduce this quickly. A number of emergency budgets followed that reduced government spending, but the deficit remained stubbornly high at about ten per cent of GDP. Between 2008 and 2011 real GNP declined by 11.9 percent. General government debt increased from 25 percent of GDP in 2007 to 107 percent of GDP in 2011. The unemployment rate averaged 4.5 percent. This increased substantially, estimated at 14.4 percent 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 election context, and specifically the economic crisis, 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 communication in large part because of the differences in coding. This means there is a lack of cross-nationally comparative data (Norris 2009; Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). Indeed, there is also very little in the way of comparable time-series within countries. However, single-country cases can make a significant contribution to comparative research in political communication (see for instance Wilke and Reinemann 2001).

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 localized editions of British newspapers. Commercial pressure in 2011 was probably greater than [at](#) any other point in the newspapers' history. Like newspapers elsewhere, Irish papers lost circulation, which fell by 22 percent 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.⁵ Thus sales have come to constitute a greater share of revenue. In particular, the papers 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 remained profitable were left 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 television in 2011 made it easier than ever for the papers to provide game-oriented coverage.

The alternative hypothesis [is](#) that media fragmentation would allow newspapers [to](#) become more policy driven because they could target specific types of readers who shared a policy outlook. So the introduction of the Daily Mail and the Sun in Ireland might have meant these papers could have safely increased policy coverage that was populist in tone and right-wing in outlook. There are two problems with this explanation. The media fragmentation that took place did so before the 2007 election. Also (as we see below) the trends we observe are uniform across all newspapers, including those that are ideologically pluralist.

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 this variable is not constant across the three elections included in this study.

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~~ to 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, Ireland's institutional structure suggests 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 (though 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. In fact it could be argued that Ireland's entry to the external funding programme in late 2010 further reduced the scope for policy debate, as so little remained to be decided by the Irish political system, though 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 3 summarises these arguments.

Table 3 about here

This brings us to the final variable, election context, or more specifically for this case: the economic situation. The 2011 election clearly represents an extreme case where the value observed in the key independent variable being tested '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. As such Ireland provides an interrupted time-series 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, caused an interruption to the dependent variable, while other potentially influential variables are held constant. The advantage of having this extreme treatment is that it will be easier to observe the impact of the variable and make inferences to where the values on the variable are more moderate. 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, 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. Papers in Ireland tend to be internally pluralist (that is, offer space to a range of opinions in their comment pages) and non-ideological, though the

Irish Times is generally regarded as a liberal ‘paper of record’ and some of the local editions of the UK paper tend to be more likely to have declared policy positions. 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.⁶ 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 (see detailed codes in Appendix); in the following we focus on descriptive statistics from the 2007 dataset as 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 et al. (2013).

There are a number of ways we can measure these frames. One is to take the whole article as the unit of analysis and code according to the dominant frame in the article (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). However it is possible that a number of frames are contained in a single article (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011), and if one were studying the effect of [an](#) article one might assume that longer articles should be more heavily weighted. Using just a dominant frame could misestimate the level of coverage of issue, strategy or game frames, if for instance strategy framing dominates an article but it covers certain policy issues as well we would incorrectly estimate 100 percent strategy coverage and no issue coverage. These errors might cancel one another out over a large number of articles such as we have, but we cannot be certain this would be the case. An

alternative is to code articles as whether a given frame is present or not; but this is an imprecise measure that loses information. We use text segments instead of full articles because they give a more precise and nuanced measure of the frame, which can be aggregated to article level for comparative purposes. For a discussion of the coding and reliability tests, see the Appendix ([available online](#)).

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 broadsheet (Farrell 1993, 1990). The proportion of election coverage framed as policy decreased from 59.2 to 30.7 percent between 1973 and 2007, while the level of game-framed coverage increased. This trend is consistent with the arguments made that there has been an ‘Americanisation’ of media across the world (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Table 4 about here

Using our data this trend is observable across all types of newspapers from 2002 to 2007 (see Table 4). In 2007, we see a 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 (Murphy 2003: pp. 17-18). 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).

In 2011, 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 in dramatic fashion. The tabloids see a large rise in policy-framed coverage of the 2011 election – to almost 50 percent for one (though it should be noted that the amount of coverage tabloids devote to election coverage was very small (see McMenamin et al. 2013)). 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 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 percent mentioned the economic crisis and a further 13.5 percent mentioned related economic issues, such as unemployment (Lansdowne/ RTE exit poll). The crisis had an impact on people's vote choices. The proposed Taoiseach (prime minister) and the set of ministers were important criteria for 35 percent of voters in choosing how to vote in 2007. This dropped to 20 percent in 2011. Meanwhile the criterion of 'policies set out by the parties' increased from 25 percent to 43 percent over the two elections (Marsh and Cunningham 2011: 185). 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 percent in 2007 to almost 20 percent in 2011. Two-thirds of the articles that make any reference to the economy in 2011 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 strategic and game-framed coverage is not uniform. Strategy-framed coverage halves – from 40 percent to less than 20 percent – but the horserace coverage actually increases quite significantly. This probably reflects the increase in opinion polling at the election. It also shows that suggestions that game and strategy-framed should be separated are correct (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). However this result does not

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contradict our expectations, which relate to overall policy-framed coverage. This still records a huge increase 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 percent of the electorate (Lansdowne/ RTE 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 percent 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 indication 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 the following changes between 2007 and 2011 are statistically significant⁷: 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. Substantively and statistically there is a significant jump in policy-framed coverage for the 2011 election. The only independent variable pointing towards such a change is the context in which the election took place: economic crisis.

Furthermore the similarities between the newspapers in 2011 are greater than those similarities within the newspapers and between the crisis election and the 2002 and 2007 'contentment' elections. Table 6 reports a variety of correlations both within and between newspapers and years for the newspaper agendas across each of the 19 policy and non-policy coding categories (see [online Appendix](#)) in the election news coverage. We can see from the left-hand section that the correlations between the papers in any year are very strong and positive. Though the mean of the correlations between the newspapers in 2011 (.847) is lower than for 2002 and 2007 it is a mean of a larger number and greater diversity of newspapers in 2011. These are much higher than the mean correlations of each of the papers between 2011 and the other two election years. The relationship between the newspapers' election coverage in the 2002 and 2007 contentment elections is higher (.904). We can see that the relationship between each paper's coverage in 2007 and 2011 is much lower. These relationships show that coverage in 2011 was very different to that in the other elections, and the coverage in 2011 was consistent across all the newspapers.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that factors additional to the media context will be an important determinant of the way the media chooses to frame an election. Specifically we say that some elections take place in a climate of contentment and some in a sense of crisis. We expect the strategy/ game frame to be more common in 'contentment' elections, whereas there should be a greater emphasis on policy in crisis elections.

Policy coverage at Irish elections from 1973 to 2007 fell continuously – consistent with the experience elsewhere as reported in much of the literature. Yet 2011, an election at a time when external bodies were required to fund the Irish state, saw policy coverage of the contest increase markedly. Ireland represents a least-likely case where all other variables pointed to reduced policy coverage. The effect of election type was remarkable and consistent across different types of

newspapers. Furthermore, we observe that within the policy coverage, the press covers those policy areas related to the crisis.

This finding is of particular 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; a country newly in a state of war might be judged by the electorate to be in a state of crisis. The 2001 Israeli election that took place during the second Intifada is a good example. Sheafer et al. (2008) graph a spike in press coverage of policy issues in the 2001 election there, to mid-40s from just over 20 per cent in 1999. Other types of crisis can also be identified, such as the 1994 and 1996 Italian elections that took place under the shadow of the *Tangentopoli* corruption allegations, which was a systemic crisis and saw the move from the First to Second Italian Republic.

A 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 Zaller's (2003) words, they raise the 'alarm' and move to lessen dramatic and entertaining routine coverage to more focused coverage that alerts the otherwise 'monitorial citizen' whose urgent attention is required. 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. Specifically the data on the 2002, 2007 and 2011 elections in Ireland show that media focus on the election tends to follow predictably the context of the elections. This outcome questions the argument that media drives the public agenda more than real-world indicators (Funkhouser 1973; Dearing and Rogers 1996).

A third theoretical conclusion relates to the qualities of democracy. Sen ([1999](#)) and many others argue that democracy can prevent catastrophes because policies are observed and questioned earlier by a free press and other institutions. That the Irish press moved so firmly to cover policy in the 2011 election might support Sen's ([1999](#)) argument. So we could have a less pessimistic outlook on the press than other commentators have had: the media can be responsive and responsible. Unfortunately this attention came too late to prevent the economic collapse as, like elsewhere, the Irish media did not discuss or question the policies that ultimately provoked the crisis.

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Table 1. Patterns of Democracy and type of election coverage

Table 2: Ordinal Logit Regression of Media Framing

Table 3: Summary of theoretical expectations and the Irish case

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

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

Table 6: Correlations between agendas of newspapers between and within election years

¹ The use of the term framing in this context is problematic. Earlier research on this topic used the term schema rather than frame (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012: 166). Entman (1993) has given a highly cited definition of framing which is 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text'. This aspect of framing is consistent with the idea that an article or the text within the article might emphasise some aspect of the election, be it the policy debate, the horse race or the parties' strategic considerations. In this regard, as McNair (2001: 38) has argued journalism is an account of

mediated reality' where the news article may influence the way we view the world, or that aspect of the world which the article addresses.

However the second part of Entman's definition focuses on how this emphasis would 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'. It is less obvious that the emphasis on policy, game or strategy does any of these, though some have argued that a focus on strategy will drive cynicism in politics more than a focus on polls (de Vreese 2004). It might seem more appropriate to think of election news coverage on game, strategy or issues as agenda setting or priming, where the reader or viewer does not have their attitudes manipulated by the way information is presented (as one sees in the famous (Kahneman and Tversky (1984) experiments), but rather certain issues or factors are more prominent and therefore more likely to be used to evaluate parties or candidates. Because 'framing' is widely accepted in this context we continue to use the term.

² The mixed evaluation of Bulgaria receives further support from the work of Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2013: 82) who, in a study of elections from 1990 to 2009, report a mean proportion of game framing of 0.53, with a large standard deviation of 0.36.

³ 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, 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 system has corporatist aspirations but is quite fragmented. Brazil and Mexico are presidential regimes. The concentration of executive power in a single person justifies a relatively majoritarian coding on the executives-parties dimension.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Calculated from Audit Bureau of Circulation 2008 - 2011 and the advertising figures are IAPI Adspend/Nielsen Media Research 2008 - 2011.

⁶ 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 of the papers in terms of length, this sample was sufficient to make reasonable comparisons with the other papers.

⁷ 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.

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: Ordinal Logit Regression of Media Framing

Majoritarian	3.15*	2.55†
	(1.34)	(1.37)
Cut 1	-1.86	-1.71
	(1.08)	(1.1)
Cut 2	0.95	0.74
	(0.84)	(0.86)
Likelihood Ratio Chi²	7.45**	4.22*
Pseudo R²	0.27	0.19

† significant at 0.1, * significant at 0.05, ** significant at 0.01

Table 3: 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 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.

Table 6: Correlations between agendas of newspapers between and within election years

Between papers (within years)			Between papers and years		
2002	2007	2011		2007	2011
.926	.895	.874	2002	.904	.647
(3)	(10)	(45)		(9)	(9)
			2007	-	.365
					(25)

Cells report mean correlation coefficient based on (N) pairwise correlations, so cell (2007) reports the correlations of the five available papers' correlations with each other in 2007; we obviously exclude correlations of the same paper within a year. For inter-year correlations on the right, these are based on pairwise correlations where we have the same newspapers available in both years.

Appendix: Coding and Codes

Coding

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 ~~many~~ of the articles now came from electronic formats they are measured in terms of 'quasi-sentences' (see Budge et al. 2001 for a detailed description). 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 this might 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.

Comment [L1]: Please add reference

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 Krippendorff's alpha was .93 (treating the data as ratio) when we tested it at the 10 level for each code (see appendix). When we treat the whole article as the unit of analysis and just

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Comment [L3]: Please add references

test for the coders' ability to distinguish between game-framed and policy-framed articles, there was perfect agreement, though with a much smaller n (26).

Codes

10 – Political System

Political System (general) – References to the democratic system and its workings/implication (e.g. placing power in the hands of people/citizens). Also refers to indirect references to democracy such as “This is not a dictatorship”. DOES NOT refer to direct references to Dail, Seanad or the Electoral System

Clientelism/Localism (as a subject) – only code for references to clientelism or localism as an abstract concept/institutional problem. Do not code mere incidences of clientelism (which belong under “locality-specific issue”) which do not make reference to the broader concept of clientelism.

Gender/Women in politics

Political Institutions – Factual description of the workings of the Dáil or Seanad or to the reform of Dáil or Seanad, including references to the power of independents to influence Dáil decisions

Government Control

Participation – code references to public participation in politics outside mere voting (public fora, protests, etc.). Also refers to exhortations to public to use their vote (rather than vote for a particular party.)

Constitutional Rights – code references to calls to changes for referenda (e.g. on rights of children)

Public Administration – Working of and reform of civil/public service and other state bodies.

Croke Park Agreement – explicit references only

Electoral System – Description of the workings of the electoral systems and discussion of alternatives to PR-STV (list system, first-past-the-post etc.)/reform of that system.

20 – Justice

Crime/Law Enforcement – references to the gardai (police) as institutions or their activities

Penal System – e.g. state of prisons or broader system

Courts – Judiciary – appointment of judges, judge pay cuts etc.

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

40 – Economy

Economic Crisis

Banking Crisis – Regulation of banks/ Capitalisation of Banks
Debt Crisis (/Bailout/IMF/ECB)
Euro currency crisis
Public Finances (includes references to spending cuts other than pay cuts/ cuts in public services)
Tax – generic reference to tax where personal/corporate distinction unclear (e.g. DIRT, VAT, Excise Duties)
Labour/ Unemployment
Emigration
Personal Tax – income tax, PRSI, universal social
Pay Cuts
Industry and Commerce – Ease of doing business in Ireland; trade policy –goods and services e.g. education
Corporation Tax
Economic Development
Housing Market – collapse of, measures to revive (inc. stamp duty changes, 1st time buyers grant, Section 23 Mortgage Interest Relief, 2nd home property tax, non-primary residence).

50 – Agriculture

Agriculture (general)
Consumer Affairs – Rip-off Ireland

60 – Social Welfare

Social Welfare (general)
Health
Pensions
Social Justice – Reference to impact of cuts on the weakest in society
Housing – Specifically references to Social Housing as opposed to the broader housing market
Immigration
Social Services/ Others

70 – Education

Education (general)
Equal Opportunities
Education Spending – state funding of private schools
Religious control of patronage

80 – Arts/Culture – incl. arts spending

Arts/Culture (general)

Arts/Culture Spending
Sport

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

Infrastructure/Technology (general) – references to Information Society, Information Economy, Smart Economy, Knowledge economy, broadband development.
Transport – roads, rail infrastructures, airports, public transport.
Regional Development - decentralisation
Housing
Science and Ethics – genetically modified organisms, stem cell research, cloning.

100 – Environment

Environment (general)
Waste
Energy

110 – Foreign Affairs

Foreign Affairs (general)
EU
International Involvement
Iraq war, war on terror, other conflicts

120 – Country specific: Ireland

Northern Ireland
Traditional Values – gay marriage, abortion, divorce

130 – Campaigning

Campaigning (general)
Campaign Activities – On the trail colour pieces/campaign diary/following the candidates at particular events.
Stunts/Gaffes -
Campaign Strategy - references to party strategy at national and constituency level
Nonpartisan
Campaigning on policy – i.e. references to importance of policy in elections without actually explaining what that policy is e.g. “our jobs strategy”.
Media coverage – reference to media coverage of the campaign
Party Structure - references to party organisation/structures during and after the election.

Campaign finance – includes corporate donations, party spending

140 – Polls/Horserace

Horserace (general) – references to party/candidate being ahead/behind/in trouble/characterised as losing/winning a battle, race, contest, game, competition.

Opinion Polls –including speculation on who gets elected (but not on the likely composition of the next Dáil.)

Candidate selection

Leaders Debates (specifically TV debates, including debating tactics/strategy)

Likely composition/organisation/working of next government – often in context of poll results – refers to party composition rather than individual ministers.

Vote Maximisation – references to at national and constituency level

150 – Leadership – references to competence and performance of leaders

Leadership/ Competence/ Performance including questions of leadership abilities. This includes candidates offering their assessments (presumably generally negative) oif ~~w~~each other. Examples where candidates criticise an opponent's policy position should be coded in two units: as 151 and according to the policy area.

160 – Political Ethics

Political Ethics (general)

Corruption/ Sleaze (references or allusions to corruption/scandal/affairs/relationships)

Negative Campaigning - represented as opposition to a policy position of another without offering policy ideas of their own.

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