

The Media's Role in America's Exceptional Politics of Inequality: Framing the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and 2003

The International Journal of Press/Politics
16(4) 548–572
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1940161211417334
<http://ijpp.sagepub.com>



Carole V. Bell¹ and Robert M. Entman¹

Abstract

This study extends Hacker and Pierson's important research on the politics of inequality by illuminating the critical role of news media in facilitating the public's acquiescence to government policies that failed to accord with their interests and values. Although benefits were heavily concentrated at the very top of the income and wealth distributions, majorities of Americans appeared to support the tax cuts, and just as important, oppositional public opinion was muted. An innovative content analysis of national television news coverage informed by the concepts of particularistic versus collective benefits reveals the interests and sources represented, and subtle ways media framing favored George W. Bush's tax proposals of 2001 and 2003. The authors find that media framing did not provide citizens with the information necessary for balanced assessment of either the effects on their own individual economic interests, or of impacts on widely shared, collective (i.e., sociotropic) values. Instead, by framing the tax cuts' putative collective benefits in terms of economic growth while neglecting the likelihood of greater inequality, and by deemphasizing the skewed particularistic benefits, broadcast coverage diminished citizens' ability to deliberate effectively over taxation policy. As a result, television news shaped an environment favorable to tax policies that exacerbated economic inequality in the United States and rendered America an outlier in income distribution among wealthy democracies.

Keywords

mass media influence, media framing, public opinion, inequality, tax policy, George W. Bush

¹George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Carole V. Bell, 204 Lake 360 Huntington Avenue Boston, MA 02115-5000
Email: cvbell@gwu.edu

Although inequality in wealth and income grew markedly between 1980 and 2009 in the United States, it increased only moderately in most other affluent democracies. By the latter year, the United States had become by far the most inegalitarian among comparable countries (Hacker and Pierson 2010). This article explores the role of mass media and political communication in shaping a political environment favorable to public policies that made the United States far less similar to the wealthy democracies, particularly of Western Europe, in the twenty-first century than during the middle of the twentieth. In this way, we seek to illuminate the ways media operations can help explain both important trends in public policy and policy divergence or convergence across distinct but fundamentally similar political systems. To help explain the outlying status of U.S. public policy on equality, this article explores broadcast news coverage of president George W. Bush's 2001 and 2003 tax cuts. Innovative content-analytical approaches are used to reveal the interests and sources represented in the coverage, and subtle ways media framing favored Bush's policies.

The Bush tax policies were critical drivers of inequality. The president argued the cuts would stimulate the economy and "make life better for average men, women, and children" (Bush 2001). What he did not emphasize is that the benefits of the cuts were heavily concentrated at the very top of the income and wealth distributions, among those earning more than \$500,000 a year (Johnston 2003). Majorities of Americans supported Bush's tax cuts, and just as important, oppositional public opinion was not intense—few if any members of Congress lost bids for reelection because they supported Bush's tax policies, and Bush himself handily won the 2004 election. This public support or tolerance is surprising for at least two reasons. First, by eliminating what were then substantial federal budget surpluses and transforming them into massive deficits (Montgomery 2011; Pew Charitable Trusts 2011), the policy predictably led to serious and bipartisan plans for major reductions in such immensely popular welfare-state programs as Social Security and Medicare. Second, the Bush policies exacerbated inequality in ways that would appear to be inimical to public preferences in this area. Research suggests that Americans support, in the abstract, a far more egalitarian distribution of income or wealth that resembles conditions obtaining in Western Europe. The most striking demonstration of this is the Norton and Ariely (2011) study finding that American respondents actually favor the (unusually equal) distribution of wealth in Sweden over that in the United States when they do not realize they are endorsing a Swedish policy. Furthermore, at least in principle, American citizens support equality in income almost as much as those in Sweden, Germany, and similar countries whose policies promote that outcome (Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Page and Jacobs 2009). America's low ranking on income and wealth equality does not arise from the American public's actually demanding more inequality than citizens of comparable countries.

As on many issues, Americans hold contradictory attitudes and impulses when it comes to equality of income and wealth. On the one hand is their belief in the American Dream, the notion (largely mythical; Hacker and Pierson 2010) that the United States provides uniquely robust opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. This dream might help explain widespread tolerance for benefits skewed toward the wealthy in

both Bush tax bills—after all, one day, most Americans believe they might become wealthy themselves (DiPrete 2007; Graetz and Shapiro 2005). As important as the belief in the American Dream is the tendency of Americans to assess policy in sociotropic terms, that is, according to its apparent benefits to the nation's *collective* welfare rather than to their own *individual* welfare (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder 1983; Mutz 1992, 1998; cf. Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001; Sears 2002). Arguably, the key potential discursive battle over the Bush tax cuts concerned which sociotropic value and collective effects would be emphasized in framing the policy: Would media discourse emphasize the promise of economic growth benefiting everyone, or rather the diminished equality negatively affecting all but the wealthiest? Sociotropic reasoning could have led majorities to reject the Bush tax policies. But that prediction would hold only if the effects on societal inequality were uppermost in their minds. If, on the other hand, the putative benefits of accelerated economic growth were stressed, then sociotropic reasoning would predictably lead to support or tolerance for slashing tax rates. Moreover, if, contrary to the sociotropism hypothesis, Americans had emphasized their individual, particularistic economic interests in assessing tax policy, then Bush's proposal to redistribute income and wealth from almost all of them to the wealthiest 1 percent should have been roundly rejected.

Crucial to the explanation of why Americans supported or tolerated the Bush policies is elite influence over political communication. Rather than arising organically from citizens' autonomous policy preferences, theories in this field (e.g., Bennett 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992; Entman 2004) suggest that America's inequality policies originate in elite ideologies (cf. Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005, 457) and interests, and in elites' ability to dominate framing of policy options in ways that obscure the effects of their choices on important values held by the public. Hacker and Pierson (2010; cf. Smith 2007; Shapiro and Graetz 2005) document the extensive efforts of the wealthiest Americans to keep equality off the agenda while promoting laws and regulations that expand their share of wealth and income. This stance finds a comfortable home in the Republican Party, with its core philosophical commitment to minimal government intervention into market outcomes. Simultaneously, this political project of the wealthy has systematically undermined what was once the Democratic Party's dedication to progressive taxation and transfer policies that reduce inequality. Additionally, research shows that the opinions and policy preferences of wealthier Americans are more likely to be heard and heeded than those of middle-income and poor Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Bartels 2008).

The case analysis here focuses on broadcast television news because it remained the most widely consumed format, and its dominant frames generally correlate highly with those in the rest of the national media. We find that the broadcast networks directed Americans' attention to the tax cuts' apparent *collective* benefits framed as economic growth, while deemphasizing the skewed *particularistic* benefits of Bush's tax cuts and the resulting augmentation of inequality. In this way and others, the coverage diminished citizens' ability to realistically evaluate the government's taxation policy either for its impacts on their own particularistic economic interests or for its effects on the

sociotropic value of equality in U.S. society. Regardless of whether citizens conceived their political interests as maximizing their own incomes or as promoting overall socio-economic equality, broadcast news obscured the implications of the Bush cuts by going along with Republicans' use of an alternative sociotropic value: economic growth.

Focusing on the media's treatment of the Bush tax cuts extends Hacker and Pierson's (2005, 2010) important research on the politics of inequality by identifying what their study, like much political science, treats as peripheral: the critical role of news media in facilitating the policy choices that magnified the country's extreme inequality between 2001 and 2010. In doing so, the article contributes to a comparative understanding of the role of media systems and political communication processes—and America's idiosyncratic versions of these—in shaping varied policies across advanced democracies despite their shared exposure to the inegalitarian “winner-take-all” economics of globalization (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

The roots of Americans' frequent disregard of economic self-interest in voting are numerous and historically entrenched (Lipset and Marks 2000).¹ We do not mean to assert that the media are the only explanatory factor in the politics of taxation or inequality during the 2000s. However, as circumstances change, voters need both “strong organizational mooring” and “consistent cues to recognize and respond to changes in public policy” (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 110). Although some of these cues are delivered through direct communication, this signaling of positions is more often delivered through the media, which act as a primary connector between citizens and their elected representatives. A wealth of research has established that news constructions have the ability to shape political preferences by emphasizing certain details while obscuring others and priming or elevating certain considerations over others (Shah et al. 2002; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). On issues like economic policy, the media play an essential role in providing information about policy options and implications.

Constraining the Politics of Self-Interest: Media, Public Opinion, and the Bush Tax Cuts

During his first three years in office, president George W. Bush championed two of the largest tax cuts in U.S. history. The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 called for a reduction in four income tax brackets and an across-the-board 5 percent income tax credit distributed to taxpayers in the form of a check by the Department of the Treasury, among other changes (see U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Taxation 2001). The Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003 accelerated the implementation of the 2001 cuts and added reductions in taxes on capital gains and dividends, as well as growth incentives for business (see U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Taxation 2003).

The president argued the cuts would stimulate the economy (Bush 2001). Critics of the policies countered they would drive up the deficit and disproportionately benefit the wealthy (Bartels 2005; Johnston 2003). Analyzing the distribution of benefits, Hacker and Pierson (2005, 33) found that “36 percent of the cuts accrued to the richest 1 percent

of Americans—a share almost identical to that received by the bottom 80 percent.” Though this disproportionate weighting toward the wealthy might have been a cause for concern, and although surveys indicated the majority of Americans believed the tax cuts unfairly benefited the rich, most polling on the tax cuts suggested that majorities nonetheless supported Bush’s proposal.

Several studies have attempted to explain this public support (Bartels 2005, 2007, 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2005; Lupia et al. 2007). Hacker and Pierson (2005) conclude that a lack of awareness about the policy’s implications was a deliberate result of sophisticated communication and procedural strategies that included design of the legislation and the way it was shepherded through Congress. To date, no study has systematically examined the media’s role in this process of selling and obscuring the Bush tax policies.

Citing numerous public opinion polls, Bartels (2008) documents Americans’ support for policies that they realize might work against their own personal economic interests. For example, he presents results from a June 2003 Harris Poll in which 50 percent of respondents thought the 2003 tax cut was a “good thing,” even though 42 percent said it would help “the rich” a lot and only 11 percent that it would help “the middle class” (i.e., themselves) a lot (Bartels 2005, 3). Bartels also reports National Election Studies data that showed overwhelming support for repeal of the estate tax, even though only the wealthiest 1 or 2 percent of Americans would benefit from the rollback (Bartels 2005, 15). On the other hand, as noted, Norton and Ariely (2011) find strong evidence that if given the larger context that allows them to clearly conceptualize the notion of wealth distribution—a concept only vaguely and rarely covered in the news—Americans actually seem to prefer moving their country from its outlier status toward the mainstream of affluent Western democracies. With regard to tax policy and its effect on inequality, then, there is a clear disconnect between values like egalitarianism, which Americans demonstrably cherish both in the abstract and in the domain of economic policy under certain circumstances, and attitudes toward tax policies that benefit a narrow elite and exacerbate inequality.

More generally, research suggests the limited impact of individual self-interest on attitudes and policy preferences both on economic issues (Sears 1993; Sears and Funk 1990) and on social issues like racial integration (see Green and Cowden 1992; self-interest is, however, more strongly correlated with activism than attitudes). Concomitantly with this sociotropic tendency, research also shows that *values* or core principles tend to weigh more heavily than individuals’ expected benefits or consequences in shaping policy preferences (Feldman 1988; Sears 1993; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001). Exposure to frames stressing a particular value should encourage citizens’ consideration of it in their policy evaluations. The political information environment also helps to determine when and how much self-interest matters in relation to values. Research shows that people are more likely to recognize and act in their own self-interest when their particular stakes in the policy are clear and substantial and when they have been primed (via media exposure, for example) to think about the personal costs and benefits of that policy. Conversely, when sociotropic considerations

are primed, they provide a counterweight, and the influence of self-interest is weakened (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001, 541). Beyond knowledge, values, and interests, citizens' existing attitudes shape their reaction to policy discourse and create a potential for a range of reactions to any particular media frame. For instance, those who think government wastes a lot of taxpayers' money will be more likely than others, all else equal, to support the Bush tax initiatives.

Though seemingly paradoxical, the diverse findings on public opinion toward taxes and inequality are at odds only if the respondents have the requisite knowledge to evaluate the consequences of tax policy and connect that knowledge with their normative values and beliefs. To understand this, it is important to have a theoretical understanding of the role of mediated information in public opinion formation.

To that end, the present study, like Hayes and Guardino's (2010) research on media coverage of the Iraq war, assumes the importance of political knowledge and media inputs in opinion formation regardless of which particular model one adopts. The authors cite both the indexing (Bennett 1990) and cascading activation models (Entman 2003, 2004) as theories that support the idea of policy debates dominated by elite framing. According to indexing, elite dominance of policy debates is attributable to two mechanisms: Government sources provide the mass media with the majority of the political information they report, and journalists calibrate the range of opinions in their stories to represent what they perceive to be mainstream government debate. The cascading activation model extends this picture, explaining how "interpretive frames activate and spread from the top level of a stratified system (the White House) to the network of non-administration elites, and on to news organizations, their texts, and the public—and how interpretations feed back from lower to higher levels" (Entman 2003, 415). Within this model, the media are not passive conduits, but rather active participants in shaping the dominant frame for a given issue.

This perspective highlights the importance of framing in understanding the nature and potential public opinion effects of media depictions of policy debates, such as those over tax policy. Understanding that framing entails the selection and highlighting of some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution, we affirm it to be the "central process by which government officials and journalists exercise political influence over each other and over the public" (Entman 2003, 417). Further, in the perpetual contest over votes, volunteers, and donations, "successful political communication requires the framing of events, issues, and actors in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations that advantage one side while hindering the other" (Entman 2003, 417). That is, policy making in democratic systems can be understood as a series of continuing competitive struggles to dominate the framing of problems and solutions. Sometimes one side in the competition succeeds in controlling the frame; other times, framing is more balanced between contending positions. The mediated discourse that results from the competition constrains the range and consistency (or contradictions) of mass opinion on the policy.

How do citizens use political information, and how much is required for citizens to make prudent decisions about policy? Along with Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) and Hayes and Guardino (2010), we endorse Zaller's (1992) general model of opinion formation, which emphasizes the importance of political information from the media as key ingredients in public opinion, in combination with existing predispositions, like values, party identification, and ideology (e.g., Lupia et al. 2007). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) write,

Political knowledge helps citizens construct stable, consistent opinions on a broad array of topics. [It] helps citizens identify their true interests and connect these with their political attitudes. And [it] helps citizens link their attitudes with their participation so that their participation serves their interests. (p. 219)

It is precisely the availability of these sorts of linkages in the most widely circulated television news outlets that we explore here. In this examination, we interpret citizens' "interests" broadly, recognizing in particular that individual, material self-interest has surprisingly limited effects on public opinion and that values and perceptions of societal effects matter a lot.

In multiple ways, the relationship between media framing and opinion formation or change is complicated and constrained (Druckman 2001; Brewer 2002). Nonetheless, empirical evidence shows that the impact of media framing on policy perceptions and attitudes is substantial. Although we found no political communication studies specifically analyzing coverage of tax policy, there is relevant research on coverage of the economy. Most important for our purposes, controlling for real-world conditions and then assessing media effects, several scholars have discerned independent impacts of economic news on public opinion (Wu et al. 2002; Hester and Gibson 2003). Most dramatically, when Goidel and Langley (1995) investigated Republican complaints that negative economic coverage adversely affected George H. W. Bush's reelection bid in 1992, they determined that negative news on the front page of the *New York Times* did influence public opinion, even taking economic conditions into account. Overall, the research literature suggests that mediated communication can affect aggregate public perceptions and opinions on the macroeconomy. It therefore makes sense to explore the media's framing of tax policy, which affects conditions at the both the macroeconomic level (e.g., growth and inequality) and the microeconomic (e.g., individuals' disposable incomes).²

Research Questions and Methods

In order to assess the extent to which the broadcast reporting on Bush's 2001 and 2003 tax cuts provided citizens with the information needed to evaluate the policies' likely effects on their own finances and on the sociotropic effects in the country as a collective whole, this study asks the following:

1. Which particularistic, individual interests were discussed and to what extent?
2. What collective (and therefore sociotropic) outcomes of the tax policy were considered and conveyed?
3. Was framing and information provision balanced between the advocates and opponents of the tax cuts, or did one side dominate?
4. To what degree were the value-related terms *equality* and *inequality* explicitly invoked as relevant criteria for assessing tax policy?
5. Which sources were quoted and therefore given direct voice to their perspectives?

Taken together, the answers will help achieve our objective of illuminating the media's role in shaping the politics of inequality in the United States.

The network evening newscasts were selected because at the time of the tax cuts, they reached both the greatest number and the broadest spectrum of Americans citizens in terms of education and socioeconomic levels.³ In addition to audience size, network newscasts have the advantage of clearly exhibiting the dominant frames in news discourse on public policy. Studies have shown that television news may be more influential in opinion formation on both candidates and issues than newspapers; are usually consistent with the content of other mainstream mass media, including radio and newspapers; and exert influence on the content of those competing media (Callaghan and Schnell 2001). As a result, both directly and indirectly, television news has the potential to wield substantial influence over public opinion formation. In addition, although the Internet was gaining momentum as a news source during Bush's first term, the leading news websites were those affiliated with the major national news organizations, including network news operations (Hindman 2009). So the dominant messages online would have largely reflected those in traditional media outlets.

Our approach is consistent with that endorsed by Matthes and Kohring (2008) regarding media framing: we scrutinize the most concrete, measurable subsidiary attributes of media discourse at a granular level of analysis rather than making broad thematic statements about news coverage. In accordance with this approach, the presence or absence of assertions in four categories was coded: particular sets of individuals benefiting from the Bush tax policies, collective economic and societal impacts, use of the explicit value terms *equality* and *inequality*, and sources quoted. See the appendix for specific coding information listed under each category.

To gauge particularistic framing, we were especially interested in the degree to which the networks supplied information that would enable and encourage citizens, in a manner suggested by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) or Hacker and Pierson (2005), to see how those in their specific income bracket would fare under Bush's proposals. When income brackets were mentioned in the coverage, this information was coded into socioeconomic class groupings using the following dollar amounts: the "poor" or "working poor" were considered those with an income range of \$0 to \$17,915; the "working class," "working Americans," or "working people," \$17,916 to \$33,376; the "middle class" or "average Americans," \$33,377 to \$100,000; the "upper-middle

class,” \$100,001 to \$150,000; and the “upper class,” “rich,” or “wealthy,” above \$150,001. These brackets were selected based on contemporaneous household income quintiles from the U.S. Census Bureau’s (2003) Annual Social and Economic Survey.

The sample frame included all news broadcasts on ABC’s *World News Tonight*, CBS’s *Evening News*, and NBC’s *Nightly News* in 2001 and 2003. The entire population of broadcast transcripts containing the keywords *Bush* and *tax cuts* was studied, as identified by LexisNexis full-text searches. Transcripts with a single, passing reference to the tax cuts were excluded. The major unit of analysis was the broadcast news story ($N = 187$). Two researchers coded each transcript. All coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved among the authors. A reliability analysis was conducted and yielded an overall Kappa coefficient of .87. Once the quantitative analysis was completed, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted. The text was examined using narrative analysis, including examples illustrating the established coding protocol. The narrative analysis provided further contextualization of the media discourse associated with the tax cuts.

Results

Beneficiaries of Tax Cuts

With respect to Research Questions 1 and 2, Table 1 shows the amount of coverage devoted to particular sets of individuals affected by the cuts, and Table 2 displays analyses of coverage framed in terms of collective outcomes. Of the 187 network evening news stories that reported on Bush’s tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, less than one-third mentioned particular socioeconomic classes or income groupings. In contrast, two-thirds of the reports ($n = 124$, 66.3 percent) mentioned that “Americans” or a close synonym (e.g., “taxpayers” and “you,” meaning presumably everyone in the viewing audience) would receive a tax cut, implying that everyone in America shared similar interests in tax policy. In other words, by far the most frequently invoked beneficiary of the Bush policy was not particularistic at all; undifferentiated collective terms, like *Americans*, were the most frequently cited beneficiary of the policy, and this, we believe, is a key to its popularity. News framed the tax cuts in positive sociotropic terms, as benefiting the nation collectively.

Among the typical examples were the following: The coverage stated that the tax plan was “designed around giving Americans a \$1.6 trillion tax cut,” and noted that the tax rebate checks sent out in 2001 were “only part of the tax cut Americans will receive this year.”⁴ The broadcast coverage also referred to the benefits the tax cut “would provide to the American people.”⁵ Similarly, quoting President Bush, an NBC broadcast stated the tax plan was for “real Americans.”⁶

Words used to modify the noun *tax cut* or *tax relief* reinforced the notion of collective benefit. Although the total dollar amount of the cuts varied throughout the coverage period analyzed as the policy was debated, reporting consistently emphasized the large aggregate size of the cuts.⁷ It also repeatedly referred to “across-the-board” and

Table 1. Stories Identifying Particular Groups Benefiting from Bush Tax Cuts (*N* = 187)

Group	Number of stories mentioning the group	Percentage of all stories
All Americans	124	66.3
Upper-class income level (see text for specific income range; "rich," etc.)	51	27.3
Married couples/families	50	26.7
Investors/businesses	44	23.5
Middle class (see text for income range)	30	16.0
Working class (see text for income range; "working Americans," etc.)	27	14.4
Inheritors	18	9.6
Lower class (see text for income range; "poor," etc.)	15	8.0
Upper-middle class (see text for income range)	10	5.3
Other	25	13.4

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Presence or absence of each was coded per story.

"massive" cuts, again suggesting that all Americans would benefit significantly. Thus, in its accentuation of size and neglect of particularistic effects, the coverage obscured differences between those who would benefit slightly if at all (the vast majority) and those who would gain massively from the new policies.

Other coverage identified "consumers" or "taxpayers" as the recipients of the tax cuts. Typically, these broadcasts either endorsed Republicans' contentions that the budget surpluses projected for 2001 and beyond belonged to the taxpayers and should be returned to them, or supported the proposition that a tax cut would result in greater consumer spending, yielding the collective benefits of economic growth and rising living standards (see Table 2). An NBC broadcast, for example, stated that since the "pot of government money is overflowing," the president argues the money "should be returned to taxpayers."⁸ An ABC broadcast stated, "Those who favor the president's plan say it will boost the economy by giving Americans more money to spend."⁹ Some, meanwhile, made both of these assertions, claiming, "The best way to recover is to let people have their own money in their pockets to spend it."¹⁰

Two other beneficiaries frequently invoked were married couples, and investors and business. According to an NBC broadcast, the tax cuts should result in "an average savings of \$1,600 for a family of four."¹¹ Often, however, the coverage included no explanation of benefits, simply referencing "tax breaks for married couples and families with children."¹² For example, an NBC broadcast stated, "Married couples, especially those with children, do better than singles,"¹³ whereas a CBS broadcast referred to the tax cuts as a "boon for families."¹⁴

Table 2. Coverage of Likely Collective Outcomes of Bush Tax Policy (Total Story $N = 187$)

Outcome	Number of stories containing references	Percentage of all stories
Economy stimulated	114	61.0
Economy not stimulated	95	50.8
Unfair redistribution of wealth	37	19.8
Fair redistribution of wealth	11	5.9
Federal programs cut	26	13.9
Federal programs not cut	17	9.1
State/local tax increase	6	3.2
No state/local tax increase	3	1.6

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Presence or absence of each was coded per story.

The bulk of the coverage when identifying beneficiaries of the tax cut thus provided information about large collectivities, such as business, families, or Americans in general. By contrast, more specific groupings that delineated the implications for distribution among different income levels or social classes received less attention. Emphasizing larger collectivities implicitly constructed the policy debate as one pitting those who wanted to help most Americans by providing them a tax cut against those who were defending some narrower interest. By paying less attention to the varying incidence of cuts in different income segments, this framing in terms of larger groupings discouraged thinking in terms of distribution and redistribution. This focus had the corollary of obscuring the policy's implications for socioeconomic equality or inequality.

When a particular income category or class was mentioned, the wealthy were most frequently cited (about 27 percent of the stories). Nonetheless, even though about 20 percent of stories quoted critics saying the rich benefited too much from the Bush plan compared with just 6 percent of stories quoting defenders asserting otherwise (see Table 2), the critique appeared akin to special-interest pleading because it was divorced from the larger value context—the deleterious effects on the value of equality. Moreover, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, the total attention to this particularistic, distributional critique paled in comparison with that given the collective benefits.

Table 2 further illuminates the answer to Research Questions 1 and 2. It shows the important consequences of the tax cut predicted by the coverage. The most common was stimulating economic growth. Slightly more stories predicted the tax cuts would stimulate the economy—and therefore serve the sociotropic value of economic growth—than would not. This issue dominated discussion of outcomes. Way down the list was impact on wealth or income distribution, as already noted. When stories did refer to charges that the tax cuts unfairly focused their largesse on the wealthy, network reporters sometimes tacked on this charge at the end of more general discussions of the plan's size and potential increase to the deficit. An NBC broadcast in March, for example,

Table 3. Average Assertions of Collective Benefits per Story

Assertion	ABC World News		NBC Nightly News		CBS Evening News	
	Procut	Anticut	Procut	Anticut	Procut	Anticut
Collective benefits						
Massive cut in tax burden	1.19	0.00	1.48	0.00	1.04	0.00
Economic growth for country	0.81	0.13	1.30	0.30	0.55	0.12
Average taxpayer/ “Americans”/“You”/ “Families”	1.25	0.06	1.98	0.32	0.65	0.08
Fiscally responsible/Important programs protected	3.25	0.19	4.76	0.62	2.24	0.2
Total	6.5	0.38	9.52	1.24	4.48	0.4

briefly noted, “Still, Democrats accuse the president of giving the most tax relief to the wealthiest and sacrificing promised campaign priorities, like helping older Americans.”¹⁵ Such glancing attention to a consideration (Zaller 1992) that might potentially have influenced survey responses and public opinion toward Bush’s policies was common.

In addition, the networks rarely used expert interviews to evaluate assertions about any unfair apportionment of benefits or economic redistribution that might arise from the proposed tax cut. Instead, on the rare instances they presented this issue, they framed it as one of political wrangling rather than substance. Further down the list of policy implications covered were the effects on federal programs and state and local government.

How the tax cut would impact funding (i.e., revenue needed) for key federal and state programs was another potentially important concern that the networks could have but rarely covered. Discussion of any negative potential impact to state and local government from lower federal revenues was often offset by supporters’ assertions that state and local taxes would not have to be raised. Ironically, in retrospect, little attention was paid to the impact on the federal budget deficit—so uncontested was the Bush administration premise that the surpluses of the late 1990s would continue. Reports neglected the slightly more subtle question of how spending cuts that might become necessary (and did indeed turn out to be required) tend to concentrate on welfare-state programs benefiting the less affluent, which would render the Bush tax policies doubly damaging to equality (on both the tax collection and government spending sides).

A Closer Look at Particularistic versus Collective Benefits

The answer to Research Question 3—was framing balanced?—is provided by assessing the data from a slightly different angle. Reports heavily favored the Bush administration

by positively highlighting collective benefits appealing to the sociotropic mindset of Americans. Table 3 displays the average number of paragraphs in each story that mentioned benefits and beneficiaries (from Tables 1 and 2) falling into one of the broad collective categories. These include descriptions of the size as “massive,” “across the board,” and the like; promises of a growing economy; depicting tax cuts as enjoyed by nearly all Americans; and guaranteeing that important government programs and fiscal responsibility would be maintained. As can be seen, virtually all the reasoning in terms of collective benefits is deployed in arguing for the cuts. ABC stories, for instance, cited an average of 6.5 appeals to collective (sociotropic) reasoning in favor of the tax cuts, versus 0.4 sociotropic reasons against the cuts (i.e., asserting that there would not be much economic growth or that important programs would have to be cut). The ratio for NBC was 9.5 to 1.2; and for CBS, 4.5 to 0.4. The emphasis when it came to collective reasoning heavily favored the Bush position on tax cuts.

Meanwhile, Table 4 reveals how little attention was paid to the distributive effects of the tax cuts on particular groups. The average story on all three networks contained less than a single assertion about which income groups would benefit (or lose). When the stories mentioned distributive effects, however, they did tend to be deployed as reasons against the tax cuts. So, though it happened relatively infrequently, when stories noted the heavy flow of benefits to the affluent, those specific assertions were employed in arguments against the policy.

Because network news paid so much more attention to what amounted to superficial sloganeering about collective benefits of Bush’s policies (“massive tax cuts” for “Americans” and the like), and because opponents had little alternative but to see their critiques reduced to similarly shallow claims if they wanted to make network news, there was an inherent tendency to framing favorable to the tax reductions. To challenge sociotropic generalizations that “massive” tax cuts would help everyone in America required opponents to deploy dry facts and figures. These are unsuited to the production needs of television news. Dealing with particularistic distributional benefits would also have demanded data more than slogans. It is no surprise, then, that combining the two categories reveals a stark imbalance in coverage favoring the tax cuts. For example, the net score in Table 4 for ABC would be 5.71 in favor of the tax cuts $[(6.5 - .38) + (.28 - .69) = 5.71]$ —or an average of nearly six pro-tax cut assertions per story for every anti-tax cut claim. The data in Tables 3 and 4 analyzing the coverage by paragraph reveal how greatly the broadcast network news deviated from their own ideals of objectivity or balance.

As discussed in Entman’s (2004) cascade model, when news coverage is this skewed, there can be a self-reinforcing impact on the political communication process. In this case, tax cut advocates benefited. The slant favoring tax reductions gave the policy an aura of inevitability, which in turn made opposition look futile. Journalists pay much less attention to those elites who seem to have scant chance of influencing policy decisions than to leaders who seem likely to control the outcome. Opponents have trouble making the news at all or, if they do speak out, run the danger of being depicted as standing in the way of a policy most leaders and Americans favor. That in turn reduces elites’

Table 4. Average Assertions of Particularistic Benefits per Story

Assertion	ABC World News		NBC Nightly News		CBS Evening News	
	Procut	Anticut	Procut	Anticut	Procut	Anticut
Particularistic benefits						
Rich will benefit (all are anti-tax cut assertions)	0.00	0.63	0.00	0.52	0.00	0.41
Working and middle classes will benefit	0.28	0.06	0.32	0.09	0.18	0.06
Total	0.28	0.69	0.32	0.61	0.18	0.47

incentives to vigorously oppose the policy, further strengthening the proponents’ command of the communication process. As we already saw, controlling the communication of the tax cut proposals was key to the plans and ultimate success of the tax cutters (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Moving to Research Question 4, the applicability of equality as a sociotropic value to assessing policy recommendations like tax cuts was almost never explicitly clarified in the news coverage. So although tax policy can be used to protect the United States from too much inequality—a value Norton and Ariely (2011) show Americans prize, even if they must be primed by contextual cues to weigh it when assessing policy—that connection was conspicuously absent from the 2001 and 2003 broadcast news. A broader LexisNexis search of news transcripts from the big three networks (not just the nightly news but also Sunday talk and other network news programs) for all instances of the terms *Bush* and *tax* along with the words *equality* or *inequality* yielded zero instances in 2001 of reporting that related the tax cuts to inequality. In 2003, there was only one exception to this pattern of omission, and even then, inequality was raised only to note its absence from current discourse:

What’s also interesting is that you’re not hearing a lot more about income inequality really. I mean, the Democrats are talking about doing something to stimulate the economy on the margins, but you’re really not talking about redressing fundamental inequalities in the income distribution of the country. It just shows the way that the debate has changed over the last ten or fifteen or twenty years.¹⁶

In contrast to this single network news discussion of inequality in relation to Bush’s tax policy throughout 2001 and 2003, a similar search for the years 2009 and 2010 reveals that the value of equality became slightly more visible during the Obama administration. Equality or inequality was discussed in relation to Obama’s economic stimulus and tax plans five times in 2009, and three in 2010. In those instances, redistributive effects were addressed from both the Right and the Left. On *Meet the Press*,

Table 5. Sources Quoted about Bush Tax Policy (Total Story $N = 187$)

Source	Number of stories	Percentage of stories
President Bush	100	53.5
Democratic legislators	89	47.6
Republican legislators	54	28.9
Unaffiliated experts	46	24.6
Conservative experts	30	16.0
Unaffiliated citizens	27	14.4
Administration officials	20	10.7
Public opinion polls	20	10.7
Liberal experts	13	7.0
Alan Greenspan	8	4.3

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Presence or absence of each was coded.

for example, roundtable participants considered columnist David Leonhardt's assertion that the Obama economic policies were "an attempt to end a three-decade era of economic policy dominated by the ideas of Ronald Reagan and his supporters in economic inequality over the last thirty years," with "tax increases and a real focus on, if you like, wealth transfer from the wealthy to the middle class."¹⁷ Still, despite this minor uptick in the discussion of economic inequality, this analysis reveals that during 2001, 2003, 2009, and 2010, covering the Bush and Obama administrations, network news appeared more likely to debate the concepts of equality and inequality in relation to gay rights, disability, and racial disparities than to wealth and income—despite the ongoing and sharp escalation in America's move toward economic inequality.

Sources Quoted about Tax Cuts

Research Question 5 asks which groups or entities were given voice in covering Bush's tax proposals. Table 5 shows that President Bush was the most frequently cited source in network news coverage of the tax changes. Over half the stories ($n = 100$, 53.5 percent) quoted his words. Bush, administration officials, and Republican legislators accounted for the vast majority of sources quoted about the tax policies. In fact, adding all Republican, administration, or conservative expert sources (including Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan) together yields a total of 212 sources in this camp. By comparison, Democrats and liberal experts were sourced 102 times, about half as much. The remainder of the sources (unaffiliated experts, polls, and ordinary citizens) numbered 93—almost as many as the opposition Democratic Party sources. Purely on the basis of sources, then, this coverage was skewed to favor the tax cuts and their supporters.

As the primary source of information about the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, President Bush was able to reinforce the theme that the budget surplus belonged to the people, conveying a sense that tax cuts were rightfully due and would be granted to all Americans

(i.e., the largest possible collectivity). Republican legislators also echoed this message, discussing the tax cuts as a beneficial policy for all or advancing the idea that a tax cut was due the American public since the surplus belonged to “the people.” Thus does the content analysis reveal that the media did cooperate with Republicans’ sophisticated communication strategy, plans described by Hacker and Pierson (2005, 2010) as essential to the successful passage of tax cuts so heavily weighted against the particularistic economic interests of most citizens.

During the initial months of 2001, on the other hand, Democratic sources offered minimal support of some tax cutting, providing it was “fair, reasonable and based on honest projections.”¹⁸ Yet, rarely did the broadcast coverage include elaboration by Democrats on the specifics of what such an “affordable and responsible” alternative to the Bush initiatives would entail.¹⁹ Democratic sources with a confrontational stance to the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts generally either failed to provide significant justification regarding their rationale for opposition or were not afforded the opportunity to do so by the networks. In other words, although some Democrats voiced dissent against the tax cut through brief attention-getting sound bites, they were rarely seen or heard elaborating on their opposition. This contrasted with the more detailed treatment of President Bush and his Republican allies justifying the policies.

In sum, the content analysis reveals that the three major television networks did not provide viewers with the information necessary for balanced assessment of either their individual economic interests or the collective societal consequences of Bush’s 2001 or 2003 tax cuts. Rife with ambiguity and sweeping generalities, the reporting failed to help those at varying income levels evaluate what share of the tax cuts they would receive—if any. It also failed to investigate the effects of the policies on the sociotropic value of equality. Instead, the majority of the news stories parroted President Bush’s optimistic and ultimately misleading rhetoric about the cuts’ collective benefits: economic growth and, therefore, continued viability of the American Dream.

Although it is far from the only reason, media treatment might provide one explanation for Bartels’ (2008) finding of strong support of Bush’s tax cuts among Americans across all classes or income levels. That finding comports with our data, suggesting how the media’s framing of the Bush administration’s tax initiatives assisted the affluent and political groups representing their interests. These groups benefit from suppressing the average American’s awareness and political expression of their individual economic self-interests (cf. Hacker and Pierson, 2005, 2010). They also benefit from policy that promotes public attention to the collective, sociotropic value of economic growth rather than rather to the value of economic equality.

The Aftermath of the Bush Cuts

Sold as a way to return to taxpayers the Clinton administration’s legacy of budget surpluses—then projected into the indefinite future—in reality, reduced tax revenue combined with sharply increased military spending, a new Medicare prescription drug program, and other expenditures to explode budget deficits, even before the economic

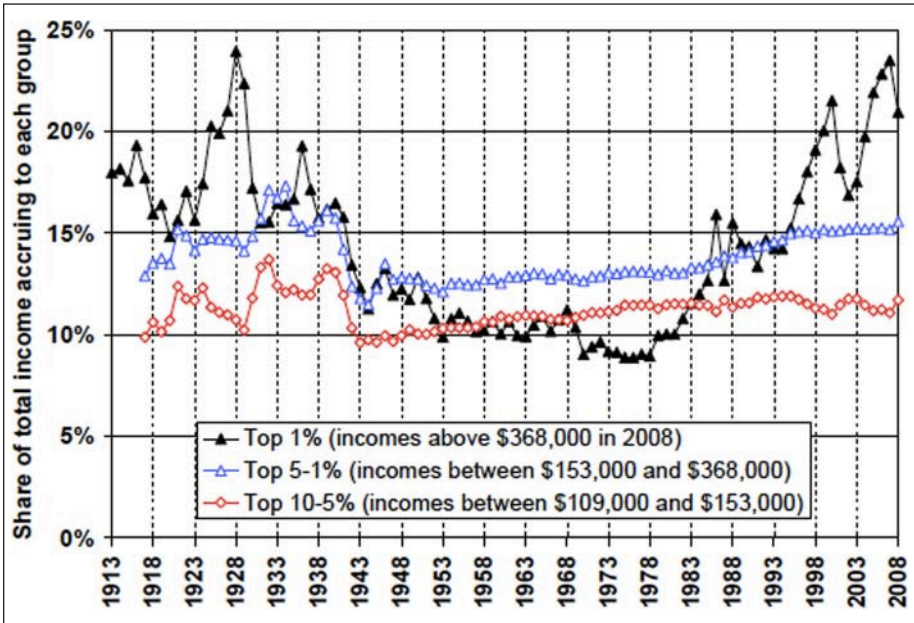


Figure 1. U.S. income inequality over time

Reproduced from Emmanuel Saez, "Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States (Updated with 2008 Estimates)" (2010), Figure 2. <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-USstopincomes-2008.pdf>.

crisis of 2008. Moreover, they contributed to a marked increase in inequality, as shown in Figure 1, without creating the kind of "trickle-down" income-enhancing economic boom that free marketers believe can fuel the American Dream (on stagnation of real income during the period, see Hacker and Pierson 2010).

On balance, no new jobs were created during the "aughts" (Irwin 2010). Not only did the Bush tax cuts fall short of the promised macroeconomic results, but they contributed to heightening America's outlier status in income inequality. As of 2010, the *CIA Factbook* ranked the United States alongside such countries as Uruguay, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Uganda, the Philippines, and Argentina in income inequality, with nearly one hundred countries possessing more egalitarian distributions of wealth. Comparison with the advanced, affluent democracies of Europe is especially instructive. The Gini coefficient of income inequality for the European Union as a whole averages 31. For the largest countries, France and Germany, it is 27 and 32.7, respectively. The U.S. Gini score is 45.

Arguably, the way Bush's tax initiatives of 2001 and 2003 were framed as benefiting the society at large had a long-lasting impact: when they were set to expire at the end of 2010, tax reductions became the key point of contention in a series of partisan legislative battles. Ultimately, the Obama administration felt compelled to extend them for

another two years despite protest from Democrats in Congress and outrage in the liberal blogosphere. Allowing taxes to return to 1990s rates was not even on the table. The Democratic–Republican divide was over Obama’s call to let tax cuts expire—that is, raise taxes—only for the wealthiest 2 percent, an egalitarian move Republicans unanimously rejected. This is quite possibly a testament to the continuing influence of depicting the Bush cuts in 2001 and 2003 as benefiting the society collectively—and of failing to clearly address alternative distributional options available to tax cutters seeking to stimulate economic growth.

Government can cut taxes in ways that both enhance equality and stimulate demand and economic growth, by directing decreases mostly to those in the middle and lower classes. That choice actually enhances the stimulatory effects of tax cuts, because the less affluent are more likely than the rich to spend rather than save the proceeds (Krugman 2009). However, promoting economic growth in an egalitarian direction was rarely explicitly discussed during the first decade of the century. Nearly a decade later, there is further indication of the power of initial framing of tax policy during 2001–3 that directed public attention away from these alternatives, and the continued failure of liberals to change the terms of the dominant frame around taxation. When the Obama administration and Democratic majority in Congress did cut taxes for 95 percent of Americans in 2009—thereby using the tax code to enhance equality—the public widely misperceived the Democrats as either doing nothing about taxes (53 percent) or raising (24 percent) rather than cutting them (12 percent) (Hendin 2010). Given the importance of elite cues in framing opinion, perhaps the absence of competing partisan narratives assessing policies for the way that they affect the consensus value of equality—analogue to the way policies related to terrorism and homeland security were assessed as to whether they “kept us safe” in the post-9/11 American cliché—discouraged attention to the policy substance of Obama’s 2009 tax cuts, obscuring their egalitarian effect.

Conclusion

Political scientists have long identified sociotropic political behavior that leads citizens to focus less on their own interests than on their perceptions of collective or impersonal societal interests (e.g., Mutz 1998). Equality is a sociotropic, non-self-regarding value, and Americans pride themselves on their belief in it, albeit in somewhat contradictory and confused fashion. The media provide only part of the explanation for Americans’ blurry thinking on taxation and equality. Nonetheless, we believe, analyzing the media’s contributions helps us understand the actual process by which Americans are discouraged from prioritizing *either* their individual economic interests or the collective value of economic equality. The attributes of the policy that the news highlights and those it downplays almost certainly shape the public opinion environment (cf. Zaller 1992; Entman 2004) in which members of Congress and the president decide. Republicans’ solidarity in managing the news so that the dominant framing of Bush’s tax initiatives would conflate the particularistic interests of the wealthiest Americans in tax cuts with

the sociotropic value of collective economic growth effectively limited Democrats' ability and incentives to push for equality-building policies.

As suggested by the inability of President Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress in 2010 to block extension of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, Republicans' media successes may have a more general result: reduced pressures, political opportunities, and political inclinations for U.S. elites—as compared with leaders in similarly affluent democracies—to promote equality. During Bill Clinton's administration, not just George W. Bush's, inequality sharply increased (see the steep upward slope of the line in Figure 1 during the 1990s and 2000s). Even when Democrats controlled the presidency, policies to substantially reverse the trend toward inequality appeared politically infeasible, whereas in comparable countries, parties supporting economic equality have been able to enact robust ameliorative measures (see, e.g., Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Hacker and Pierson 2010). At least during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the media helped fashion an imbalanced political information environment, one that facilitated Americans' consent on policies that distributed particularistic benefits to a narrow slice of the citizenry while serving neither of the collective, sociotropic values of concern here: sustained economic growth that expands the pie for everyone and a more egalitarian distribution of income and wealth. In this way, the media contributed to a pattern of substantive policy making that made the United States exceptional among wealthy democracies.

Appendix

Transcript Number _____ (use date mm/dd/yy)

Number of Words in Transcript ____ Network 1. ABC 2. CBS 3. NBC

Circle all statements that appear in the transcript, re something that will happen, should happen, or has happened.

People

1. Americans/everyone/people/taxpayers/across the board etc. will/should/have receive[d] a tax cut or rebate.
2. Lower class/poor [or specified lower class income bracket] will receive a tax cut or rebate.
3. Working class [or specified income bracket] will receive a tax cut or rebate.
4. Middle class [or specified income bracket] will receive a tax cut or rebate.
5. Upper middle class [or specified income bracket] will receive a tax cut or rebate
6. Upper class [or specified income bracket] will receive a tax cut or rebate.

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

7. Married couples/families [no class specified] will receive a tax cut or rebate
8. Investors/businesses/corporations will receive a tax cut or rebate (capital gains or dividend tax).
9. Inheritors [no class specified] will receive a tax cut or rebate (estate tax).
10. Other specific group(s) mentioned as receiving cut or rebate: (list up to 4):

Implications

1. Economy/investment/growth/jobs/consumer spending will/should/have been stimulated by tax cut or will not harm fed budget deficit (including claim of large surplus available or cut is not too big).
2. Economy investment/growth/consumer spending will/should/have NOT been stimulated by tax cut or fed budget/deficit harmed (including claim no large surplus available or cut is too big).
3. Federal programs/spending will be cut and should not be (including Social Security or Medicare funds).
4. Federal programs will NOT be cut or some federal programs/spending should be cut.
5. State/local taxes will increase or programs cut and should not be.
6. State/local taxes will NOT increase or programs cut, or st/loc taxes should increase and programs cut at discretion of state/local officials and public.
7. Income, wealth or tax burden will be unfairly/unwisely/unnecessarily redistributed from the less affluent to the more affluent. Against redistribution; it's undesirable or unacceptable.
8. Income, wealth or tax burden will NOT be unfairly/unwisely/unnecessarily redistributed from the less affluent to the more affluent. For redistribution; it's desirable or acceptable.

Sources Quoted

Circle all sources directly quoted in the transcript by journalist (not paraphrased)

1. President Bush
2. Other administration officials (political appointees, not career bureaucrats)
3. Democratic legislator or party official
4. Republican legislator or party official
5. Economist, academician, or other expert with no partisan label attached (NOT including journalists or economist/expert labeled as affiliated with corporation, bank or investment firm)

6. Economist, academician, or other expert labeled as affiliated with corporation, bank, investment firm or ideologically conservative think-tank or group
 7. Economist, academician, or other expert labeled as affiliated with union or ideologically liberal think tank or group
 8. Individual citizen/Small business owner
 9. Greenspan or other Federal Reserve Bank official
 10. Public opinion polls
-

Acknowledgments

The authors thank former University of North Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communication PhD students Cary Frith and Barbara Miller for their suggestions and their invaluable assistance in coding some of the data reported in this article. Some of the results provided here were originally presented at the 2005 Annual Research Conference of the International Communication Association (Entman et al. 2005). Abby Jones, a PhD student at George Washington University, also provided valuable research support and contributed to the content analysis.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

Professor Robert M. Entman received financial support from the Harvard University/Carnegie-Knight Task Force Research Fund for research on media bias and media legitimacy in 2007-08, during which some of the early work for this project was initiated.

Notes

1. In fact, although the idea of American exceptionalism was traditionally used to convey the sense that America is unique and even extraordinary among nations in terms of its revolutionary history, values, and emphasis on individual freedom, a number of historians and sociologists have long understood the term to include the unusual weakness of class consciousness, class-based political conflict, and socialist political parties in the American experience.
2. Few social scientific studies directly consider how the media present the differential impacts on income and wealth distribution from varying public policies. Instead, much of the research on media coverage of issues related to economic inequality focuses on social class and arises within the cultural/critical studies tradition. It is primarily concerned with how the news media serve to perpetuate the dominant political ideology and stereotypes about class (as well as race and gender), with occasional exceptions (Kumar 2001; Jameson and Entman 2004; Champlin and Knoedler 2008). The latter reveals that newspaper coverage of class-related issues to be both rare and inadequate in scope, failing to present the kind of analysis required for citizens to evaluate possible policy remedies to economic inequality.

3. "Network evening news is, however, still an extraordinarily powerful source of information in America. Some 21.6 million people on average watched one of the three programs each night. That is roughly four times the combined number watching each cable news channel's highest-rated program." Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the Media 2011*, <http://stateofthemedias.org/2011/overview-2/key-findings/#audience>.
4. "First Group of Rebate Checks Mailed Out Today," *ABC World News Tonight*, July 20, 2001.
5. *ABC's World News Tonight*, May 1, 2001.
6. *NBC Nightly News*, March 2, 2001.
7. *NBC Nightly News*, February 2, 2001; *NBC Nightly News*, April 6, 2001; *NBC Nightly News*, April 16, 2001; *CBS Evening News*, May 1, 2001; *NBC Nightly News*, September 7, 2001; *NBC Nightly News*, January 7, 2003; *NBC Nightly News*, April 15, 2003; *CBS Evening News*, April 15, 2003; *ABC World News Tonight*, April 24, 2003.
8. *NBC Nightly News*, March 2, 2001.
9. *ABC's World News Tonight*, April 24, 2003.
10. *NBC Nightly News*, January 25, 2001.
11. *NBC Nightly News*, February 5, 2001.
12. *ABC's World News Tonight*, May 16, 2003.
13. *NBC Nightly News*, January 13, 2003.
14. *CBS Evening News*, May 22, 2003.
15. *NBC Nightly News*, March 2, 2001.
16. *This Week with George Stephanopolous*, ABC News, January 12, 2003.
17. *Meet the Press*, NBC, March 1, 2009.
18. *NBC Nightly News*, February 15, 2001.
19. *CBS Evening News*, February 3, 2001.

References

- Bartels, Larry M. 2005. "Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(1):15–31.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2007. "Homer Gets a Warm Hug: A Note on Ignorance and Extenuation." *Perspectives on Politics* 5(4):785–90.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 1990. "Toward a Theory of Press–State Relations in the United States." *Journal of Communication* 40(2):103–27.
- Brewer, Paul. 2002. "Framing, Value Words, and Citizens' Explanations of Their Issue Opinions." *Political Communication* 19(3):303–16.
- Bush, George W. 2001. *The President's Agenda for Tax Relief*, ed. U.S. Treasury. Washington, DC.
- Callaghan, K., and F. Schnell. 2001. "Assessing the Democratic Debate: How the News Media Frame Elite Policy Discourse." *Political Communication* 18(2):183–213.
- Champlin, Dell P., and Janet T. Knoedler. 2008. "American Prosperity and the 'Race to the Bottom': Why Won't the Media Ask the Right Questions?" *Journal of Economic Issues* 42(2):133–51.

- Chong, Dennis, Jack Citrin, and Patricia Conley. 2001. "When Self-Interest Matters." *Political Psychology* 22(3):541–70.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1997. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- DiPrete, Thomas A. 2007. "Is This a Great Country? Upward Mobility and the Chance for Riches in Contemporary America." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 25(1):89–95.
- Druckman, James N. 2001. "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *Journal of Politics* 63(4):1041–66.
- Entman, Robert M., Carole Bell, Cary Frith, and Barbara Miller. 2005. "Constraining the Politics of Self-Interest: How the Media Helped to Sell the Bush Tax Cuts." Paper presented to the International Communication Association, New York.
- Entman, Robert M. 2003. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11." *Political Communication* 20(4):415–32.
- Entman, Robert M. 2004. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feldman, Stanley. 1988. "Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values." *American Journal of Political Science* 32(2):416–40.
- Feldman, Stanley, and Marco R. Steenbergen. 2001. "The Humanitarian Foundation for Public Support for Social Welfare." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(3):658–77.
- Goidel, Robert K., and Ronald Langley. 1995. "Media Coverage of the Economy and Aggregate Economic Evaluations: Uncovering Evidence of Indirect Media Effects." *Political Research Quarterly* 48:291–312.
- Graetz, Michael J., and Ian Shapiro. 2005. *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Green, D. P., and J. A. Cowden. 1992. "Who Protests: Self-Interest and White Opposition to Busing." *Journal of Politics* 54(2):471–96.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2005. "Abandoning the Middle: The Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(1):33–53.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2005. *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2010. *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hayes, Danny, and Matt Guardino. 2010. "Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq." *Political Communication* 27(1):59–87.
- Hendin, Robert. 2010. "Poll Reveals Most Americans Don't Know They Got a Tax Cut." *CBS News*, February 12, 2010. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-6201911-503544.html?tag=contentMain.
- Hester, Joe Bob, and Rhonda Gibson. 2003. "The Economy and Second-Level Agenda-Setting: A Time-Series Analysis of Economic News and Public Opinion about the Economy." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80(1):73–90.
- Hindman, Matthew Scott. 2009. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Irwin, N. 2010. "Aughts Were a Lost Decade for US Economy, Workers." *Washington Post*, January 2, p. A1.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jameson, Jessica Katz, and Robert M. Entman. 2004. "The Role of Journalism in Democratic Conflict Management." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9(2):38–59.
- Johnston, David C. 2003. *Perfectly Legal: The Secret Campaign to Rig Our Tax System to Benefit the Super Rich—and Cheat Everybody Else*. New York: Portfolio Books.
- Kenworthy, Lane, and Jonas Pontusson. 2005. "Rising Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Affluent Countries." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(3):449–71.
- Kinder, Donald R. 1983. "Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion." In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. A. Finifter, 389–425. Washington, DC: APSA Press.
- Kinder, Donald R., and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1981. "Sociotropic Politics: The American Case." *British Journal of Political Science* 11(2):129–61.
- Kinder, Donald R., and Lynn M. Sanders. 1996. *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Krugman, Paul 2009. *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008*. New York: Norton.
- Kumar, Deepa. 2001. "Mass Media, Class, and Democracy: The Struggle over Newspaper Representation of the UPS Strike." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18:285–302.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Gary Wolfe Marks. 2000. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. 1st ed. New York: Norton.
- Lupia, A., A. S. Levine, J. O. Menning, and G. Sin. 2007. "Were Bush Tax Cut Supporters 'Simply Ignorant?' A Second Look at Conservatives and Liberals in 'Homer Gets a Tax Cut.'" *Perspectives on Politics* 5(4):773–84.
- Matthes, Jorg, and Matthias Kohring. 2008. "The Content Analysis of Media Frames: Toward Improving Reliability and Validity." *Journal of Communication* 58(2):258–79.
- Montgomery, Lori. 2011. "On the Way to a Surplus, a \$12 Trillion U.S. Detour." *Washington Post*, May 1, 2011, p. A-01.
- Mutz, Diana C. 1992. "Mass Media and the Depoliticization of Personal Experiences." *American Journal of Political Science* 36:483–508.
- Mutz, Diana C. 1998. *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes*. Cambridge Studies in Political Psychology and Public Opinion. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, Michael I., and Dan Ariely. 2011. "Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(1):9–12.
- Osberg, Lars, and Timothy Smeeding. 2006. "'Fair' Inequality? Attitudes toward Pay Differentials: The United States in Comparative Perspective." *American Sociological Review* 71(3):450–73.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences, American Politics and Political Economy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2009. *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Income Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Pew Charitable Trusts. 2011. *The Great Debt Shift: Drivers of Federal Debt since 2001*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Sears, David O. 1993. "Symbolic Politics: A Socio-Psychological Theory." In *Explorations in Political Psychology*, ed. S. Iyengar and W. J. McGuire, 113–149. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sears, David O. 2002. "Political Symbols and Collective Moral Action." In *A Psychology of Human Strengths: Fundamental Questions and Future Directions for a Positive Psychology*, ed. L. G. Aspinwall and U. Staudinger, 289–303. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Sears, David O., and Carolyn L. Funk. 1990. "The Limited Effect of Economic Self-Interest on the Political Attitudes of the Mass Public." *Journal of Behavioral Economics* 19(3):247–71.
- Shah, Dhavan V., Mark D. Watts, David Domke, and David P. Fan. 2002. "News Framing and Cueing of Issue Regimes: Explaining Clinton's Public Approval in Spite of Scandal." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 66(3):339–70.
- Smith, Mark A. 2007. *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2003. "Annual Social and Economic Supplement." In *Current Population Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Taxation. 2001. *Summary of Provisions Contained in the Conference Agreement for H.R. 1836, the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001*. Washington, DC: Author. <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS52180>.
- U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Taxation. 2003. *Summary of Conference Agreement on H.R. 2, the "Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003"*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS45332>.
- Wu, H. Denis, Robert L. Stevenson, Hsiao-Chi Chen, and Nuray Guner. 2002. "The Conditioned Impact of Recession News: A Time-Series Analysis of Economic Communication in the United States, 1987–1996." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 14:19–36.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bios

Carole V. Bell (PhD, University of North Carolina) was the 2010–11 research fellow in political communication at the George Washington University.

Robert M. Entman is a J. B. and M. C. Shapiro Professor of Media and Public Affairs and professor of international affairs at the George Washington University. Author of *Projections of Power* (Chicago, 2004), his latest book is *Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Misconduct* (Polity, 2012).